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Russian Influence in the Global South:

Analyzing the Portrayal of Russia and the West in Zimbabwe

During the Russian War in Ukraine

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Abstract

The thesis at hand investigates the mirroring of a Putin-constructed strategic narrative in the Zimbabwean media landscape during the Russian war in Ukraine. The Russian influence on the global South could lead to erosion of democratic and peace structures and thus, is crucial in understanding global (in-)security. The African continent, and especially Zimbabwe, remain highly underrepresented in the research regarding international security. With a qualitative content analysis of two-tiered sources – Putin's publications preceding the war and the Zimbabwean media's publications – the thesis sheds light on the Russian influence in the global South. Following a constructivist argument, the thesis argues that language plays a central role in influencing security and/or stability. The empirical analysis proves the existence of a narrative not only within Putin's publications, but also an enriched version of the narrative within the analyzed Zimbabwean media outlets ZBC News and The Sunday Mail. The media use Putin's narrative as a sort of blueprint and then embed in their own security landscape. Thus, ZBC News and The Sunday Mail underline the alignment of Zimbabwe with the Kremlin and present the Kremlin's actions not only as favorable, but as crucial. Hereby, the thesis sheds light on the struggle for the *true truth* in global politics.

Abstrakt

Tato práce zkoumá zrcadlení Putinem vytvořeného strategického narativu v zimbabwské mediální krajině během ruské války na Ukrajině. Ruský vliv na globální Jih by mohl vést k erozi demokratických a mírových struktur, a proto má zásadní význam pro pochopení globální (ne)bezpečnosti. Africký kontinent, a zejména Zimbabwe, zůstává ve výzkumu týkajícím se mezinárodní bezpečnosti velmi málo zastoupen. Pomocí kvalitativní obsahové analýzy dvoustupňových zdrojů – Putinových publikací předcházejících válce a publikací zimbabwské médií – práce osvětluje ruský vliv na globálním Jihu. V návaznosti na konstruktivistickou argumentaci práce tvrdí, že jazyk hraje ústřední roli při ovlivňování bezpečnosti a/nebo stability. Empirická analýza dokazuje existenci narativu nejen v rámci Putinových publikací, ale také obohacenou verzi narativu v analyzovaných zimbabwských médiích ZBC News a The Sunday Mail. Tato média využívají Putinův narativ jako jakýsi plán a následně jej zasazují do svého vlastního bezpečnostního prostředí. ZBC News a The Sunday Mail tak zdůrazňují sblížení Zimbabwe s Kremlem a prezentují kroky Kremle nejen jako příznivé, ale jako zásadní. Tímto práce osvětluje boj o skutečnou pravdu v globální politice.

Title

Russian Influence in the Global South: Analyzing the Portrayal of Russia and the West in Zimbabwe During the Russian War in Ukraine

Název

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Klíčová slova

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The author hereby declares that he compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.

The author hereby declares that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.

The author hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.

Prague, July 26, 2024

Josefine Mainka

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List of Abbreviations

EU	European Union
IR	International Relations
ISS	International Security Studies
IW	Information Warfare
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
QCA	Qualitative Content Analysis
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
US	United States of America
USSR	Union of Socialist Soviet Republics
WW2	World War 2
WW3	World War 3
ZANU	Zimbabwe National African Union
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union

Introduction

During recent years, the foreign policy of the Russian Federation has increasingly gained significance, especially in nations in the global South. Gaps between narrations of foreign policy events between Western- and Russian-influenced countries grow. More concrete, how governments could possibly be influenced to align with the Russian Federation, even though in Western *truth* the Russian Federation is clearly using an aggressive foreign policy.

To understand the foreign policies geopolitical dynamics and their impact on the international community, an in-depth analysis of these policies narrations deems crucial. Therefore, this master's thesis explores – through a qualitative content analysis (QCA) – how a Russian strategic foreign policy narrative in regard to the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine (from 2022) mirrors in the public media of Zimbabwe.

On February 24th 2022, 6:20 AM, reality changed for many Ukrainians: The Russian Federation launched a full-scale invasion, rather than fueling the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Three days before the invasion the Russian President Vladimir Putin stated:

“In NATO documents, our country [Russia] is officially and directly declared the main threat to North Atlantic security. And Ukraine will serve as a forward springboard for the strike. If our ancestors had heard about it, they probably would simply not have believed it. And today we don't want to believe it, but it's true.”

(Putin, 2022b)

Putin highlights not only the threat Ukraine poses to Russian security, but also emphasizes the aggressive nature of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

(NATO). Moreover, Putin draws historical analogies with those who came before the current generations of Russians and therefore embeds the current events in a greater historical context. This narration of the status quo is able to justify the intervention through Russian forces or even points it out as crucial to the Russian security.

While the forces still engage in traditional, kinetic combat, the online sphere is increasingly becoming part of the battlefield: TikTok, Telegram and Instagram among others quickly started to serve as information platforms about the conflict's reality. As the conflict is no longer solely based geographically in Ukraine, it can be considered an information war in the online sphere. Hence, the Kremlin's attack on Ukraine can be considered as an exemplification of a broadening of war. (Social) Media platforms and outlets serve as information sources and are known to shape opinions on current affairs amongst citizens and states.

However, a shift to the online sphere is known to increase language polarization. Polarized language might draw a bigger audience to an article or post, making it more successful. Throughout the Russian war in Ukraine, polarization became increasingly important by shaping narratives which were originally based on the conflict itself. In regard to the broadening of the warfare concept, information then plays a crucial role: as reality is always constructed to some extent, reality can be strategically influenced (Campbell et al., 2019).

One strategy of strategic influence is the employment of selected language frames or narratives. Polarization as well as narratives are based on specific patterns of language, which highlight certain parts of information while leaving others in the dark. Narratives give sense and meaning to actions since they entail an initial

situation or order, a problem disrupting said order, and a resolution to re-establish the order. Strategic narratives can hence, offer an explanation of how different actors shape the international sphere.

The shaped information could play a crucial role on the African continent. As the full-scale Russian invasion on February 24th, 2022 and its accompanying implications for international security has led the majority of United Nations (UN) member states to condemn the Russian actions. Nevertheless, 35 nations were not condemning / aligning with Russia¹. Especially African nations appear to be more hesitant to cut ties with the Kremlin.

The Kremlin's, relations with African nations are neither a *great return* nor newly invented, but mostly date back to relations between African states and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). African leaders perceive the USSR and later the Russian Federation as a favorable partner to the West, especially due to the support of anti-colonial movements by the Kremlin. By offering an alternative, China and Russia also provide an alternative narrative to the West which might be based on narrated information and accelerates the pre-existing anti-Western sentiment. Putin has managed to exploit this sentiment and framed himself as the leader against Western (colonial) influence. After the Trump-administrations withdrawal from Africa, as a result of the recalibration of counter-terrorism efforts, a loophole for Putin to fill the security void opened up (BBC News, 2020; Kuo, 2023).

¹ United Nations General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1 (March 2nd 2022)

Gaining significant ground, the Kremlin has repeatedly stressed the importance of the African continent for future foreign policy and global security decisions. Despite not being one of the Top10 trade partners in Africa, Russia has acknowledged the importance of the public opinion's role. Deeming important to Moscow the (public) opinion opens up a stage for conflicting narratives, leading to an ongoing struggle between East (the Russian Federation and China) and the West. A battle for conflicting narratives has thus opened up the arena for an information war *fought* on the African continent (Droin & Dolbaia, 2023; Sweidan, 2023).

The Russian struggle for information dominance manifests in several occasions. The (planned) construction of *Open Education Centers* in 28 African nations goes hand in hand with the Russian attempt to attract more African students to Russian universities. The Open Education centers essentially are language centers as well as cultural hubs are often associated with the respective universities. Further, the influence in the information domain mirrors in the InterRussia fellowship program. The program offers training to African journalists and aims to “understand Russia from a Russian perspective” (Rossiya Segodnya Press Office, 2023). Another example of the consolidated Russian-African relationship is the Africa-Russia-Summit held in St. Petersburg in 2023. Despite the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine, 49 out of 54 African nations participated in the summit. In comparison with the preceding summit, held in Sochi in 2019, the participating numbers have increased (Droin & Dolbaia, 2023; Siele, 2024; Sweidan, 2023).

One of the participating nations has been Zimbabwe. The sub-Saharan nation has ties with Russia that date back to the Soviet Union and is amongst those that abstained during the vote for UN General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1.

In 2024, the Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa did not only call Putin his “dear brother” (2024), but also stated that:

“Zimbabwe considers the Russian Federation as a global ally. [...] It is regrettable and unacceptable that the collective West continues to peruse hegemonic tendencies that blatantly violate the sovereign equality of nations, justice and fairness”

(Mnangagwa, 2024, as cited in Reuters).

These statements do not only show the alignment of the Zimbabwean government with the Kremlin, but feature components of the same narration that Putin imbedded the invasion in (2022). Following the assumption that the Russian and the Zimbabwean government share this narration, it also sheds light on the Zimbabwean government’s perception of the world – a perception that might manifest within the civil society as well.

Therefore, this thesis argues that the construction as well as adoption of a narrative leads to changes in one’s perception of the world. Through the adoption of a possible Russian narrative in regard to the war in Ukraine by the Zimbabwean media, the Kremlin steps up its efforts in dominating the information spaces in the global South. A Russian-constructed strategic narrative aims at not only justifying the actions in Ukraine, but to sway the Zimbabwean to support Russia’s actions and secure Russian influence in the entire sub-Saharan region, especially over countries which become increasingly isolated from Western states. Zimbabwe serves as an empiric example for the thesis as it is one of the nations potentially influenced by a Russian strategic narrative.

Thus, this thesis aims to investigate how strategically used information can influence a conflict surrounding or even become a danger to (already fragile) peace structures. The research question(s) at base of this thesis are as follows:

How does the Russian Strategic Foreign Policy Narrative reflect in the Zimbabwean public media?

How does Putin deploy a narrative in those publications preceding the war in Ukraine (July 2021, February 2022)?

In which way does the narrative mirror in the Zimbabwean public media?

The qualitative nature of the research question calls for a qualitative methodology. Hence, this thesis will employ a QCA, based on Mayring's approach. The QCA allows for an in-depth assessment and understanding of the analyzed material which deems crucial in answering the research question. To answer the first sub-question, I will analyze three of Putin's publications preceding the war in Ukraine (one article, two speeches), while the second sub-question will analyze data consisting of articles published by two English-speaking Zimbabwean media outlets: *ZBC News* and *The Sunday Mail*.

Furthermore, the social-constructivist argument of the thesis manifests in the theoretical concept the thesis draws from: strategic narratives. By embedding the empirical analysis in International Relations / International Security Studies (IR / ISS) theory, the thesis will contribute to the existent body of literature in this field. The focus on the impact of language on security becomes increasingly relevant. Through the all-time availability of (social) media, any war can be *livestreamed* into any living room. However, the sole availability as well as accessibility of all

information at any given time does not make it automatically more truthful. Hence, information – truthful or not – plays a crucial component in shaping the general opinion about gaining support, regardless of victim and aggressor roles in a conflict.

Africa's significance for international and European security networks is highly relevant. Nevertheless, the continent is heavily under-reported and underrepresented in the ISS academic debate. With the continent taking a leading role in migration flows towards Europe, it hence plays an important role in Western security perception.

To answer the research question, I will at first review the current state of the art in the academic debate focusing on information warfare and the concrete use of (Russian) strategic narratives. The second part of the thesis will be the conceptualization of the underlying theoretical frameworks this thesis draws from, before analyzing the empirical data. The empirical data is two-fold: at first, the data stems from three publications of Putin preceding the war, at second, the data stems from two Zimbabwean media outlets (ZBC News and The Sunday Mail). In the following part, the thesis will present the outcomes of the narrative analysis and qualitative content analysis (QCA) and discuss them, before answering the research question and drawing a conclusion in the last chapter.

1. Theoretical Underpinnings

In the following chapter, I will first review the existing literature and current state of the art, before then conceptualizing the theoretical underpinnings deployed in this research. The theoretical framework as well as the literature review will make up the foundation for the following empirical analysis.

1.1. Literature Review and Current State of the Art

The review of the preexisting literature aims to not only narrow down the research gap the thesis fills, but also lays the ground for the preceding theoretical conceptualization. To reach these aims, the literature review touches upon the underlying theoretical framework of constructivism the thesis follows, before secondly connecting constructivism and narratives in International Relations (IR) and International Security Studies (ISS). A third part focuses on the use and deployment of narratives as part of foreign policies in a nation's strategy and then connects the theoretical concept with empirical examples; while the last part reviews the state of the art regarding the use of strategic narratives through the Russian Federation.

1.1.1. A Social Constructivist Approach to International Relations

As this master thesis follows the approach that language is used to construct an understanding of security, the base of the theoretical framework roots in the theoretical concept of constructivism. Social constructivism as a theoretical approach in the field of IR is a well-researched topic and finds its roots in the works of Alexander Wendt. Wendt's main argument follows the understanding that state behavior and the international system's structure are not solely determined by material factors – such as military power or economic resources – but social factors. Social factors

can be norms, beliefs, and /or identities. *Reality* as such, is thus the product of human activities and social practices.

In the work *Social Theory of International Politics*, Wendt (1999) provides an argument countering the pre-dominant theory of Waltz's neo-realism². Wendt argues that states find themselves within discursive, social practices which reproduce or transform they perceive one another, whereas anarchy is described by Wendt as "what states" (Wendt, 1999, p. 7) make of it.

Wendt's basic argumentation of a constructed world was then developed further by Balzacq (2009). Balzacq connects Wendt's base with the concept of securitization and stresses the influence of constructivism on the generation of securitized arguments through a state.

1.1.2. Constructed Reality: Narratives as Strategies

Moreover, scholars have identified different linguistic approaches that used to comprehend and construct this reality: narratives are used as part of the foreign policy and therefore hold a huge relevance in international politics. Within the academic literature on narratives, scholars argue that language "is not [...] a tool for representing reality, but is a means to make sense of reality in a social context" (Vall Castello, 2016, p. 130).

The article *Strategic Narrative: A new means to understand soft power* by Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin (2014) focuses on exactly this interconnection and highlight that the study of war and media might benefit of an in-depth analysis of strategic narratives. They root the use of soft power in current international politics

² Waltz argues that the anarchic structure of the international system is responsible for the state's and especially great power's actions. This is defined as neo-realism (Waltz, 1979).

on Nye's conceptualization of persuasion and influence³. With soft power asking *what the best way to influence international affairs* is, narratives are constructing a reality that is beneficial to certain states. Further, Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin highlight that narratives themselves could be considered as power resource as they contest within the international arena through different strategic deployments; while they are simultaneously a strategy of states (and individuals) to make sense of the chaos surrounding them (Roselle et al., 2014).

In an earlier work, Antoniadou, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin have described narratives as "frameworks that allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation" (2010, p. 4). Narratives, according to their approach, entail storylines which are sense-making organizational tools. Through the coherent and convincing frame of narrative (foreign) policy challenges are imbedded in a greater context and coherently 'tied' together. Moreover, the authors define a characteristic feature of a narrative: selectivity through which narrative authors can draw attention to / away from certain events while strategically deploying this attention. Antoniadou, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin stress that a narrative entails both a story and a plot. While the story describes what *actually* happened, the plot describes what a narrative author actually presents to an audience (2010).

In relation to this argument, scholars have discussed the role of narrative elements being constructing elements in discourse rather than just a sole way of argumentation. Llanque (2014) discusses whether narrative elements in political theory can either be argument-supporting or conditioning towards the political

³ Nye defines soft power as the ability to influence someone through influence and persuasion, rather than coercion. In this understanding soft power consists of different components: attraction, persuasion, and agenda-setting (Nye, 2017).

argumentation. Further, he argues that even the understanding of *security* could be considered a discursive narrative as narratives are defined as well as constantly reproduced interpretations of reality (Llanque, 2014).

With these two works Antoniadou et. al. shaped a base for analyzing narratives within IR: taking the theoretical approach of embedding them in constructivism and connecting them with a strategic deployment within a state's foreign policy, while Llanque takes a more proactive approach and points out the connection of narratives with (suggested) action strategies.

Other scholars focus on the power of narratives towards an audience by identifying the different components of narratives and their deployment. Gadinger, Taylan & Jarzebski (2014) highlight the reduction of complexity through the deployment of narratives and the speakers' possibilities to then adjust the narrated story to the audience's prejudices and presets. By focusing on this interconnectivity, they stress that it is nearly impossible to distinguish the term narrative from mentalist categories such as "*frames, scripts, arguments, ideas or belief systems*" (Gadinger et. al., 2014, p. 69) or to see a clear difference to structuralist terms such as "*collective myths, identities, world views, ideologies or discourses*" (Gadinger et al., 2014, p. 69).

All these works are providing a base to a systematic framework to comprehend the importance of narrative projection. Additionally, they shed light on the strategies of actors to shape the international order through the deployment of narratives. In general, scholars have identified a shift with solely narrated strategy as a point of departure towards strategic narratives (Freedman, 2006; Ringsmose & Børgesen, 2011).

Moreover, scholars have not only highlighted the deployment of narratives in foreign policy, but also the connection with hybridity of war and information warfare (IW). In the work *The Role of Strategic Narratives in Information Warfare*, Dumitrescu (2019), analyzes the connection between IW and strategic narratives.

As strategic narratives make use of language to achieve one's aims, they can weaponize information and take upon the role of IW. IW describes several activities, such as the impact on information technologies (hard- and software), (counter-) intelligence and psychological operations. Basic components of IW are defined as the deliberate use of mis-, mal-, or disinformation. Explanatory, IW against a target country, is often characterized through strategic messaging disseminated through the media landscape as well as its respective channels (Lilly, 2022; Splidsboel Hansen, 2017).

1.1.3. Strategic Narratives as a Tool for Analyzing Foreign Policy

Different scholars have then, based on their work, analyzed a number of empirical examples in which states have deployed narratives as part of their foreign policy.

Browning (2011) circles back to the understanding that foreign policy is always, at least to an extent, determined by dominant societal actors and their interests. The article follows the understanding that language holds the power to constitute reality. Narratives as "carriers of power" (Browning, 2011, p. 678), provide a meaningful base which then leads to action, while describing the 'we' and 'other' are like or aim to be like. In particular, the contest of defining those categories is constituting the central realm of foreign policy. Narratives in his approach, thus are much rather a mechanism of coping with reality than a provision of alternatives. Browning

highlights his approach through the empirical example and case study of Finland (Browning, 2011).

Nevertheless, a main focus within the academic literature using empirical examples has been the use of narratives in authoritarian states – mainly within the Chinese foreign policy. Scholars have emphasized the role narratives play in analyzing China as a shaping factor of east-Asian politics as well as a *geocultural* power. Hereby scholars have stressed the role of narratives deployed in Chinese public diplomacy and through the Confucius Institutes (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019; Hartig, 2016; Winter, 2014).

While the preceding works focus on general foreign policy, a different strand of research focuses on the role of narratives in conflicts. Scholars point out that as storylines during conflicts, narratives can be intertwined with the spread of state-led (dis-, mis-) information campaigns. The chapter *Changing the Narrative: Information Campaigns, Strategy and Crisis Escalation in the Digital Age* delivers insights into four examples of states using narratives in the information age: China, India-Pakistan, United States and Russia (Freedman & Williams, 2021).

Another in-depth work is the book *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War*, which explores the role of narratives to maintain domestic support of the respective governments. Different case studies deliver an overview of thirteen democratic governments strategies (Graaf et al., 2016).

Other scholars have focused on the weaponization and importance of social media in war. Hereby, the focus does not only lie on rogue groups or hackers (Singer, 2001), but also the general transformations the use of social media brings to the

realm of war (Patrikarakos, 2017; Sacco & Bossio, 2015; Shehabat, 2013; Singer & Brooking, 2006).

A general argument these works have in common is that language – when deployed strategically – hold power within the information domain of a state. Narratives as carriers of the information serve as a strategic tool for conducting campaigns.

1.1.4. Russian Foreign Policy and the Deployment of Narratives

The conceptualization of language as an information tool is by far means a new approach in the Russian academia. The importance and use of information in warfare in the Russian foreign policy finds its roots in the Soviet Union's (USSR) conceptualization of war. Whereas Lenin refers to "war as the continuation of politics by other (i.e. violent) means" (Jonsson, 2019, p. 3), other scholars, such as Kanevsky & Shabardin, stressed the inclusion of nonmilitary means (1987). Nevertheless, the Soviet theorization of war after World War 2 (WW2) stresses the importance of Marxist-Leninist thought as the underlying concept of war, while the different identified tools and strategies of war did not affect the definition itself (Jonsson, 2019).

After the downfall of the USSR the concept of warfare has been broadened and widened in the strategic thinking: while the early 1990s – determined through Soviet thought – stressed a traditional understanding of warfare, the early 2000s highlighted the use of nonmilitary means. Scholars stressed a blurring of the lines between war and peace. Moreover, they acknowledged the use of information as a weapon and the stressed an increased effectivity of non-military means in sufficiently reaching strategic outcomes. Despite the fact that the early 2000s lacked a coherent conceptualization of warfare and strategy, the use of information as

warfare has been acknowledged through different scholars (S. L. Bogdanov, 2003; Kazarin, 2002; Kvachkov, 2004; Orekhov & Chekinov, 2004; Serebryannikov, 2004).

In 2013, Bogdanov and Chekinov have shaped the term *New Generation Warfare*, which often is referred to as the “Russian blueprint for contemporary warfare” (Jonsson, 2019, p. 74). This *New Generation Warfare* became highly important for the asymmetric conduct of the Crimean operation in 2014. According to the Russian perception developments in connection with the Arab Spring and the Color Revolutions in the Russian *near abroad*⁴ are prove of the US-American conduct of this hybrid form of warfare. The conceptualization thus stresses that victory is achieved not only through kinetic force, yet much rather through the crucial means of psychological and information warfare (S. A. Bogdanov & Chekinov, 2013; Jonsson, 2019).

The Russian academic debate has influenced the understanding of warfare insofar as that the *Foreign Policy Concept 2013* as well as the *Military Doctrine 2010* focus on conflict conduct as an integrated approach of non-military and traditional means of war and even stress the power the civil society holds in influencing decisions (Jonsson, 2019). However, there also has been a debate in the strategic thought focusing on the layout of the mentioned non-military means.

⁴ The Russian near abroad refers to the post-Soviet space.

Thus, the deployment of narratives in foreign policy as part of an IW is mainly conceptualized through three strategic thinkers: Valery Gerasimov, Igor Panarin, and Aleksandr Dugin⁵. While Gerasimov is often connected with hybridity of war, his approach does have some impact on IW as well.

Gerasimov points out the increased struggle between East and West. Going along with that is the heightened need for asymmetric responses to counter asymmetric attacks through non-military means of war. Gerasimov further stresses that the use of non-military means is not auxiliary, yet the preferred conduct of warfare to win a conflict. In connection with the information space, these asymmetric strategies can accelerate and heavily deduce the opponent's potential (McKew, 2017).

Yet, the deployment of information as an asymmetric strategy has also found its way into Panarin's conceptualization of IW, laying the ground for the Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation. Panarin's later works provided the base for the Kremlin's need to counteract the West on the so-called information front, while the perception of IW is based on the great-power dominants and state-building in the awareness of the Russians. Another emphasis lies on the role of the Arab Spring and the Color Revolutions in the post-Soviet space. Both are perceived as a product of Western aggression and meddling in the international arena.

Basic terms which Panarin established are: social control and maneuvering, information manipulation, disinformation, fabrication of information, lobbying, blackmail, and extortion of desired information. Panarin further distinguishes between

⁵ The perceived importance of Dugin's writings faces a huge gap between in-/ and outside Russia. While foreign thinkers exaggerate his role as a sort of mastermind behind Putin, Russian academics and officials often denounce Dugin as a far-right propagandist borrowing his ideas from Western far-right groups and hence describe his influence as limited. Nevertheless, he holds some sort of influence within the Russian academic debate (Laruelle, 2015).

open and secret instruments of IW: instruments can be propaganda, intelligence, or analytical components (like media monitoring), an organizational component, while organizational refers to the coordination and steering of channels, through secret agents, as well as other combined channels, such as special operation forces (Fridman, 2018; Bielawski & Radomska, 2017).

Lastly, Dugin's comprehension of netwar is crucial for the conceptualization of the current Russian IW deployed in this research project. Netwar, perceived as an artificial process plotted by the West, seeks to destabilize the entire region of the post-Soviet space. Therefore, the need for information military infrastructure is a product of the deployed net-centric warfare. Dugin developed the *Eurasian netwar model*, offering a response to challenges posed by the United States. Moreover, Dugin refers to the potential ending of the liberal world order and the underlying ideological foundations of the Western states. Dugin additionally emphasizes the depth of the divide between East and West, as well as the need for information weapons to counter Western influence (Darczewska, 2014; Fridman, 2017, 2017; Bielawski & Radomska, 2017).

Nevertheless, the role of Russian foreign policy narratives plays a huge role within the general academic literature. In 2019, Gorenburg provided an examination of the Russian narrative in the paper *Russian Foreign Policy Narratives*. Gorenburg identified different categories of the narrative, such as ties with the Soviet-era allies, Russophobia, outside interventions in sovereign affairs, whataboutism, Russia as a proponent of multipolarity in the world, the promotion of international structures in which Russia takes upon a leading role, and fraternalism with the Russian near abroad.

In this strand of academic literature, scholars predominantly focus on narratives, as part of IW, targeting Western states. Kassianova (2001), among different scholars, has assessed the implications for the realm of international security through the Russian narrative. Her paper *Open to the West? Evolution of State Identity in the Foreign Policy and Security Discourse*, lays the ground for comprehension the importance of identity provision exerted through a narrative for the Russian foreign policy.

While some scholars, such as Sazonov and Mölder (2020), analyze the case of pro-Russian media outlets in the Baltics during the COVID19-pandemic in 2020; others, like Thornton (2015), examine the example how Russia *won* Crimea in 2013 when looking to Western governments. Thornton further highlights the need of Western governments to respond to asymmetric threats accordingly (2015). Franke imbeds the IW strategy within the broader Russian foreign policy and supports his arguments by four foreign policy examples: the annexation of Crimea, the campaign against Carl Bildt⁶, messages sent by military flights, and the control and censorship of the internet.

The Russian deployment of narratives has also been subject to analysis in regard to the 2022-full scale invasion of Ukraine through Russia. Scholars, such as Czifra-Tóth, analyzed the relevance of the stability-narrative for the Russian domestic sphere (2024). While Snigyr analyzed the concrete narrative deployed by Russia to justify the intervention, other scholars analyzed the reflection of the narrative in different (Western) states (2024): Brusylovska examined the reflection of the Russian narratives of war in the Serbian and Polish press (2023), Nemečková

⁶ Carl Bildt is a Swedish politician and served as prime minister between 1991-1994.

focused on Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia (2023); but also, the representation of the narratives within the right-wing discourse has been subject to analysis (Grigoryan, 2024).

1.1.5. Narratives and Information Warfare on the African Continent

Although there is a huge variety of academic literature focusing on Russian IW targeting Western states and states in the Northern hemisphere, there is a gap within the scholarly focus on the layout of IW targeted against the African continent. One of the few works, focuses on the role of disinformation in regard of mercenaries. Lyammouri & Eddazi (2020) have stressed the role the public plays yet focus more on the actual impact of the disinformation spread by mercenaries has. The chapter *Russia in Africa: Expanding Influence and Instability* (Siegle, 2021) takes a slightly different approach and hence, focuses on the combination of information campaigns and mercenaries to reach the Russian strategic aims in Africa.

Obi & Okafor (2023) first declare Africa as impacted by information / propaganda and hence, a theater of conflict of the Russian war in Ukraine. Despite the limited amount of research focusing on Africa and the lack of research focusing on Zimbabwe, Gadzwika, Mukaripe, and Sauti have attempted to fill this research gap. Their chapter *Depictions of the Ukraine-Russia Conflict in the Zimbabwean Press. A Frame Analysis of The Sunday Mail and the Zimbabwe Independent Newspapers*, focuses on how the Zimbabwean media frame the war in Ukraine. While the chapter delivers insights into the deployed frames and their connection with the Russian Federation, the chapter nevertheless exhibits an unbalanced view of the Russia-Zimbabwe relationship and its outcomes.

Whereas there is an acknowledgement of the importance of understanding Russian IW and the role strategic narratives hold within as well as the influence on Western democracies, there is a huge research gap in regard to the African continent. By analyzing not only the existence of a narrative in the Russian foreign policy, but also its *mirroring* in the Zimbabwean media landscape, this dissertation is able to shed light on an absolutely under-represented field within the IR/ISS literature. Zimbabwe herewith is merely **one** example of those countries often overlooked within the academic debate. By analyzing the Zimbabwean case, this thesis can serve as a starting point to close a huge gap within the research of narratives, IW, and ISS.

1.2. Theoretical Framework and Conceptualization

Rooted within this approach, this thesis follows the approach that language merely functions as a tool to shape information expressing those social factors identified by Wendt. In this sense strategic narratives are considered as a constructivist approach to ISS (Gadinger, et. al., 2014).

A second underlying assumption in the construction of narratives is the key principle that politics are not fixed to places, such as parliaments, governments, parties, interest groups, but is constituted through the societal confrontation of differently generated legitimation attempts (Gadinger et. al., 2014).

Within the following paragraphs, I will define the approach to the Russian strategic narrative deployed within this research before embedding it within the broader information warfare strategy used by the Kremlin. The last part of the theoretical conceptualization will cover the development of a narrative analysis grid which will then be used as a tool for analysis within the first part of the empirical research.

1.2.1. *The Russian Strategic Narrative: Seeking a Definition*

As highlighted through the extensive literature review the Kremlin's current understanding of war and warfare finds its roots in the Soviet conceptualization of warfare. After the USSR's breakdown as well as increased influence of information warfare and technology in strategic thinking, the deployment of narratives have found their way into the Russian foreign policy. In a best-case scenario, narratives can lead to an increase of a state's soft power, with soft power defined as an actor's ability to reach their aims through methods of attraction rather than through payment or coercion. While the use of narratives is not unique to the Russian Federation, Russian narratives are thought of being highly persuasive – including abroad (Chapman & Gerber, 2019; Wagnsson & Lundström, 2023).

One powerful actor in the conduct of soft power⁷ are media broadcasts as they influence whether the public thinks about certain topics and how they are considered in the popular discourse. Through strategic narratives Russia has attempted to influence public opinions to accept their worldview through the media landscape in other countries (Chapman & Gerber, 2019, p. 758).

Strategic narratives within this thesis are defined as

“means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors”

(Miskimmon et. al. 2018, p. 6).

⁷ While media broadcasts and outlets are by far not the only actor in the conduct of soft power, this thesis draws from Nye's approach and relates it to the power the media-created discourse holds. Further, manipulation, deception and disinformation might not be the ultimate goal of the media, yet they hold a crucial role in shaping the discourse of a nation (see chapter 2.1.2. *Constructed Reality: Narratives as Strategies*).

Based on this definition, strategic narratives refer to a form of “organized storytelling” (Gadinger et. al., 2014, p. 72). Thus, language is not only making reality describable and comprehensible, but functions as a medium of reality’s construction. In this sense organized actors, such as people, states, parties, governments, associations, NGOs, civil society movements or individuals, have to be understood as processes. Within politics narratives – consisting of framed information – withhold power in the discourse covering political issues. In this understanding, language helps to structure social processes of reality construction. Hence, language utilized in discourse is not passive, but active. Accordingly, language must be understood as the constitutive of social reality. Language conveys meaning and representations that do not simply *reflect* social reality, but rather construct and constitute it. Due to that certain courses of action become more meaningful than others as identities serve as yet another variable to explain action and behavior (Browning, 2008; Gadinger et. al., 2014).

Narratives therefore are strategic in the sense of ordering an actor’s perception of, and narration about, the self, the international system, as well as issues in domestic, regional, and global politics. Moreover, this strategic sense mirrors in the three levels of narratives:

- international system narratives, referring to narratives about the order and structure of the world and its systems;
- national narratives, describing a state’s history, values, and goals;
- lastly, issue narratives, describing the necessity of a specific policy and desirability (Gadinger et al., 2014; Roselle et al., 2014; Tyushka, 2021).

The Russian strategic narratives leverage “combined energy for varied sources amplify assorted crowd-sourced stories, bolstering one narrative” (Tyushka, 2021, p. 120). Within the Russian narrative Europe has always held a special role in the storytelling of *the self versus the other*. The role of the Russian Federation stretches from being part of Europe, to being the superior Europe, or an alternative Europe with the Eurasian integration being an alternative form of regional integration and cooperation. The content of the narratives as well as their logic and rationale of deployment is a mirror of the Kremlin’s struggle in a geopolitical context. Hereby especially the Western media plays a role in facilitating the Kremlin’s narratives in the (media) discourse – possibly through counter-narratives (Tyushka, 2021).

To summarize, this research understands narratives a structuring element of discourse that allow a certain actor to apply meaning to the international system, the national sphere, and the individual self. Often governments use narratives to imbed a course of action within a grand scheme. Further, the media landscape plays an increased role in disseminating narratives.

1.2.2. The Russian Strategic Narrative as Part of a Broader IW Strategy

The use of strategic narratives must be understood in the broader context of the Russian understanding of war and foreign policy. Both have often been brought into connection with three buzzwords: ‘hybrid warfare’, ‘new-generation warfare’, and the ‘Gerasimov doctrine’. While the definitions of these concept might differ greatly, they all essentially describe the same evolution of warfare: the combination of (non)military forms to pursuit political goals.

However, the revolution of information technology plays an increased role in the Russian understanding of war today. Accompanied by the argument of the continuous changing nature of warfare, the Russian understanding of war deploys a broadened concept of war far beyond the sole battlefield. Lines between war and peace become blurred due to the implantation of a so-called gray zone of war. Overall, the Russian understanding of war has been highly influenced through the color revolutions and the impact of information warfare, while finding its roots in the Soviet conceptualization of warfare (Jonsson, 2019).

The relevance of narratives and information already finds its roots within the USSR's conceptualization of warfare. Lenin turns back to a Clausewitzian approach of warfare by defining it as "the continuation of politics by other (i.e. violent) means"⁸ (Lenin, 1915, p. 219). Lenin's definition later laid the ground for the Soviet comprehension of war and warfare. However, the deployed definition did not specifically exclude the use of non-military means. In this sense, strategic narratives are considered to be part of information warfare. The act of *weaponizing* the narrative needs to be understood as a military / political strategy and tool of (dis-) information. Through this definition the Russian strategic narrative becomes an asymmetric strategy / tool in a broader information warfare strategy as a multi-layered conflict approach deployed to pursuit political goals (Jonsson, 2019; Tyushka, 2021).

A possible rise of strategic narratives is intertwined with a transformation of the media and information landscape. Whereas the use of information in war has already been subject to study by the ancient Chinese scholar Sun Tzu, the

⁸ The Prussian strategic thinker and general Carl von Clausewitz defined war in his book *On War* (1832) as *the continuation of politics by other means* or in other words: war is an instrument to reach one's strategic aims (von Clausewitz, 1832).

dissemination of this media has transformed: the distinction between international and national, broadcast and post-broadcast media is not as clear anymore and media organizations much rather provide platforms of interaction (Micciche, 2021). Therefore, these platforms allow for new *bottom-up* public diplomacy by enabling publics to interact and [...] influence each other independently of government communications, with *soft power* reconceptualized as horizontal and dispersed (Antionades et.al., 2010).

In this sense Russian strategic narratives today needs to be interpreted as the intersection of fields “IR, strategic communication and strategic studies” (Tyushka, 2021, p. 116). Moreover, narratives can serve as *weapons of mass distraction* and thus, cause destruction through distraction. They shape or enable conflict environments and take a strategic shape through the structuring nature. Therefore, narratives are relevant in regard to battlefields, conflicts and wars and even the deployment of counter-narratives need to be considered as part of the strategy. Hereby those narratives, which are disseminated through institutions, such as the media or societal groups (e.g. the army) are known to be more salient to the broader population (Browning, 2008, 56; Tyushka, 2021). Furthermore, the institutionalization of a certain narrative also stands as evidence of the respective society’s “political and social power relationships” (Browning, 2008, p. 57).

1.2.3. Components of the Russian Strategic Narrative as a Framework for the Analysis

The Russian strategic narrative is highly determined by the components of the *Ruskiy mir*, sovereign democracy, modernization and political culture. While the first two components are goals within the narrative itself, they lead to the ultimate, final goal of making the Russian Federation a leader.

Russkiy mir translates to Russian world and describes an ambivalent term offering anyone in the domestic sphere as well as abroad a reference point to relate to the Russian Federation. The Russian world refers to a culturally unique space determined through the influence of the Russian language, culture, traditions as well as military and politics. The role the Orthodox church plays in propagating this concept makes it different to other post-imperialist approaches. To summarize, Putin's used civilizational-nationalistic Russkiy mir ties together the Tsarist and Orthodox past, the Soviet defeat of Nazi-Germany, with the current abuses of the Russian population and cultural space (Zabirko, 2018).

Further, Surkov's concept of a *sovereign democracy* refers to the individual freedom, while sovereignty refers to national freedom. In this understanding sovereign democracies make up the opposing end to all "*global dictatorships and monopolies*" (Mäkinen, 2011, p. 151). Surkov's conceptualization defends the Russian position by referring to the true essence of a concept misunderstood by others – either intentionally or by mistake. Sovereignty as a concept then concerns not only the national dignity and pride, but also Russia's *image* abroad (Mäkinen, 2011).

This dissertation argues that the *image* is a strategically deployed narrative which imbeds the foreign policy as well as understanding of war in a much broader context. The earlier concept of sovereign democracy and the newer concept of a Russian-centered world are influencing the foreign policy and hence, assist in creating a narrative to legitimize actions.

To analyze strategic narratives as part of the Russian foreign policy, this thesis deploys a so-called *narrative assessment grid* (see **Table 1: Components of a Narrative**).

Components of the Russian Strategic Narrative			
Who is the narrator ?			
Characterization	Setting	Emplotment	
Actors and characters	Setting, environment, and space	Conflict / action	(Suggested) resolution
Defines the characters of the story and their different interests, behavioral traits and characteristics. In the international system these could be states, non-state actors, great powers, normal powers, rogue states, terrorists, NGOs, and MNCs (multinational corporations). Elements of this characterization are the labelling of characters, description of their behavior, association of different characters with one another, description of underlying decision-making processes.	Describes the international system presented and its functionalities. Therefore, the setting – as well as the actors – are based on assumptions about the underlying principles and rationales. The setting defines the background against which the story takes place. Elements of the setting are describing the decision-making situation and involved stakes, definition of appropriate and inappropriate behavior and drawing historical analogies.	This component stresses the importance of temporality – as narratives are often addressing past, present and future. This category identifies perceived dangers and those who are supposed to confront them and how. The description of the conflict nature lays the ground for comprehending why a situation unfolds and imbeds it in the narrative. Elements are reasons for the foreign policy, and means to achieve objectives of the foreign policy.	Bounds the possible in both: thought and action. The narrative's suggested conflict resolution describes how a situation unfolds and can be resolved (beneficial to the narrator). The elements of this component are the objectives of the foreign policy as well as the explanation of success and failure in achieving the objectives, plus attributing either credit or blame.

Table 1: Components of a Narrative (based on Gadinger et. al. & Miskimmon et. al., 2014, 75-76; Opperman & Spencer, 2023, p. 121)

Deriving from the literature in regard to the components of strategic narratives, I have developed the following categories to identify a narrative within Putin's publications and later the Zimbabwean media:

- the characterization (see chapter 3.2.1. *The Actors: A Collective West Against Russia* and chapter 3.3.1. *Russia, the West, and Their Relationship*),
- the setting (see chapter 3.2.2. *The Setting: History Determines the Present* and chapter 3.3.2. *A Dysfunctional and Corrupt International System*)
- and the emplotment (see chapter 3.2.3. *The Emplotment: A Situation of Conflict* and chapter 3.3.3. *A Russian-led Solution to the Current Misstate*).

The first dimension describes the characterization of the different actors / characters which are characterized in the narrative and therefore, provides clues for the overall meaning of a story. The audience grasps an understanding of the “motives, interests, abilities, and behaviors of the narrative actors” (Oppermann & Spencer, 2023, p. 122).

An example of the characterization in Russian foreign policy is “Russia as a bastion of traditional values” (Gorenburg, 2019). In this characterization all of the Kremlin’s actions and motives are predetermined by the Russian “tradition, domestic spiritual culture, self-awareness, and finally, the very history of [Russia] as a distinctive civilization” (Gorenburg, 2019). This characterization is relevant in justifying the caution of Russian leaders to develop closer ties with Western states (Gorenburg, 2019).

A second dimension focuses on the setting. The setting sketches out the background of a told narrative and delivers insights about the unfolding story and meaning its meant to convey to an audience. In regard to foreign policy, it places the narrative in a greater (discursive) context and maps out the particular decision-making situation. Often historical analogies play an increased role as the setting embeds the foreign policy in the broader context of “gain/loss, cooperation/conflict, necessity/choice, or emergency/business-as-usual” (Opperman & Spencer, 2023, p. 122).

An example of the setting within the Russian narrative is the positioning of Russia as the center of the Russian world. The Russian world hereby refers to the broader geographical context of Eurasia and is determined through shared values. Further, the “concept of justice is regarded as superior to the concept of legality” (Snigyr, 2023, p. 18), immensely influencing the Russian statecraft (Snigyr, 2023).

The third dimension focuses on the temporal or causal emplotment, embedding the events into a coherent story with meaningful relationships. The single event becomes comprehensible to the audience through a plot-sequence linking it to other events. Moreover, the emplotment asks for a causal explanation of events, the definition of objectives of the foreign policy, the needed steps to achieve the defined objectives, as well as the definition of success / failure towards the desired outcome of the narrative. In conclusion, the emplotment is deeply intertwined with the allocation of blame / responsibility for issues the foreign policy addresses (Opperman & Spencer, 2023).

The emplotment in the Russian foreign policy, for example, describes the narration of Russia aiming at stability and multipolarity in the world through the promotion of international structures in which Russia takes upon a leading role. Blame is therefore allocated within the interventions in sovereign states through the Western leaders, something Russian *refrains* from doing (Gorenburg, 2019).

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Strategy and Data

To answer the research question(s), the analysis will be two-tiered: while the first part of the research focuses on identifying a narrative within Putin's pre-war publications, the second part examines the resonance of an identified narrative within the Zimbabwean media discourse (ZBC News; The Sunday Mail). Moreover, the qualitative content analysis also helps to explore the salience of the Russian strategic narrative.

The following part describes the deployed research strategy within this dissertation. Hereby, the scientific quality criteria of transparency, range, and intersubjectivity shall be guaranteed (Mayring, 2015). To answer the research question, this thesis will deploy the methods of narrative analysis and qualitative content analysis.

In order to answer the research question, this research drew data authored by Putin and media sources to construct a coherent image of the (public) perception in regard to the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine (since 2022).

The material by Putin consists of two speeches named 'Address by the President of the Russian Federation' and one article named 'On the Historic Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'. The website *Kremlin.ru* already published the article in July 2021, after two build-ups of Russian forces among the Ukrainian border and as part of the prelude to the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine. Putin held the first speech on February 21st 2022 and the second three days later, on the morning of the invasion: February 24th 2022. Those three publications are considered as the three key publications in regard to the Russian war in Ukraine. They allow for an in-depth comprehension of a Putin-constructed strategic narrative without altering. An altering of the narrative might become noticeable in later publications by Putin, to legitimize the conflict's reality which might not correspond to an earlier version of the narrative. Due to the dense use of language in the three utilized publications of Putin, they deemed sufficient for the qualitative nature of the narrative analysis. By analyzing these three publications, the narrative analysis sheds light on the narrative deployed by Putin on the day of the invasion in 2022 and therefore, lays ground for the analysis of this specific narrative's mirroring in the Zimbabwean media.

Thus, the media data of relevance for this research is material published in the timeframe: February 24th, 2022 – August 31st 2023. The data retrieval time frame is determined by the amount of data which can be sufficiently analyzed in the thesis at hand. Further, the time frame of 18 months simultaneously allows for detailed depth of the analysis rather than an analysis of *ad-hoc* responses.

On both levels of analysis, the retrieval of the data of online sources has been the first step in research. This deemed crucial as the availability of data in the online sphere can change due to external influences (i.e. changes in the political landscape). The analyzed data stems on the one hand from three publications by Putin, and on the other hand from the publications of the Zimbabwean media outlets *ZBC News* and *The Sunday Mail*. ZBC News is the Zimbabwean national broadcasting company, recognized under the Zimbabwean constitution and established over 40 years ago (ZBC, 2022). The Sunday Mail is a weekly newspaper run by Zimbabwe Newspapers. Established in 1980, the company is the largest publisher in the country and the only privately run media company, while still remaining government-owned (The Herald, 2013). Both sources are English-speaking and belong into the top media distributors in Zimbabwe, while mainly aligning with the government line of communication (BBC News, 2024).

I retrieved data from the online sources of ZBC News and The Sunday Mail. The utilization of the publications in this research is based on the content. Due to the layout of the research question, I record-kept data, rather than creating new data (e.g. through the conduction of expert interviews). Before excluding publications, I checked whether the documents contained pre-defined key words. The key words were defined due to the literature about the context of the Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine (starting from 2022). An article was selected if it contained the word – or

a combination of the words – “Russia”, “Russian Federation”, “Kremlin”, “Ukraine”, “war”, “Putin”, “Zelenskyy”.

This procedure left me with 81 articles that are relevant for this research (see **Appendix A: List of Used Publications in the Analysis of the Zimbabwean Media**) and said three publications by Putin. In the following step, I imported the documents into the software MAXQDA. MAXQDA is a program for qualitative analyses. Whereas I analyzed Putin’s publications newest to oldest, I analyzed the publications by the Zimbabwean media oldest to newest (Methoden Coaching Morgenstern, 2020).

2.2. Narrative Analysis

The first step in answering the research question will be the conduction of a narrative analysis of Putin’s three publications, to identify – if existent – the deployed narrative. The narrative analysis will follow the approach proposed by Opperman & Spencer. As human beings make sense of the world and use narratives to negotiate the understandings of political discourse, narratives need to be considered as a form of structuring discourse; the narrative analysis needs to be understood as a discourse analytical method. This thesis assumes that narratives are central in comprehending political discourse as well as the discursive construction of social and political facts. In the analysis, narratives are understood as a “specific form of political discourse that consists of three interrelated elements: setting, characters, and plotment” (Oppermann & Spencer, 2023).

While *setting* describes the context in which a narrative unfolds – this process can be compared to a theater stage, with *characters* describing those who perform the story and drive it forward. Lastly, *plotment* describes what happens in the

narrative, similar to a script, which makes the story intelligible and provides orientation towards some form of resolution. Based on the proposed analysis procedure by Opperman & Spencer (2023), the following coding scheme has been developed (see **Appendix B: Codebook (Narrative Analysis of Putin's Publications)**).

In the next step I have then applied the coding scheme to the material, before revising the results. The coding throughout the analysis has been supported through the software MAXQDA. It is important to note that an overlap between the three structural elements of the narrative occurs often in the empirical material, as the elements determine one another (Opperman & Spencer, 2023).

2.3. Qualitative Content Analysis

While the narrative analysis is based on categories deriving from the theoretical framework (see **Table 1: Components of a Narrative**, chapter 2.2.3 *Components of the Russian Strategic Narrative*), the methodology for the analysis itself is a qualitative content analysis (QCA). The QCA is used to analyze the empiric data based on the findings of the narrative analysis. Hereby this thesis assumes that the Russian strategic narrative mirrors within the media landscape of the Zimbabwean media (more specifically within the published articles by ZBC News and The Sunday Mail).

By using the QCA, based on Mayring's systemic approach, the method serves to analyze the ideologic / societal content of texts. Thus, the QCA is analysis of comprehending the meaning structures within the material (Oswald, 2019).

If following Mayring's categorizing approach the development of the category system is either conducted inductively or deductively. For this dissertation a mix of both category systems have been used as the base for the analysis derives from

the preceding narrative analysis, yet with staying open to inductively developed categories (especially as sub-categories). Nevertheless, in both strategies the rules for category- development are in common (Mayring, 2015). The mixed coding system at base of the QCA is made up by a total of 61 codes (see **Appendix C: Codebook (Qualitative Content Analysis of Zimbabwean Media Outlets)**).

Further, the QCA analyses the text in the context of their origin. Mayring points out that the following conditions of the origin of the data material need to be put into the focus: author, or interactors involved in the creation of the material; the emotional, cognitive, and action background of the author(s)/ creator(s); the target group of the material; the context of the material creation; as well as the sociocultural background (Oswald, 2019). The QCA deployed in this research follows a ten-step-approach (see **Table 2: A QCA's Ten-Step Approach**).

Step	Task
1	Determination and Assessment of the data's relevance. In this thesis this step will be conducted through the selection process of articles which hold relevance for the research focus.
2	Data-context analysis.
3	Describing the formal characteristics of the data. Within in this research, this refers to articles published by the Zimbabwean media outlets ZBC News and The Sunday Mail.
4	The development of a research question.
5	Development and use of the theoretical framework as an underpinning for the research.
6	Decision on the analysis technique: a) a structuring analysis with a deductive category system derived from the theoretical framework (narrative analysis); and b) a structuring analysis with a mixed category system (deductive, main categories deriving from the narrative analysis and inductive subcategories deriving from the material itself).
7	Developing and setting rules for: a) coding units (the smallest text unit to be coded): single words, b) context units (the largest text units to be coded): an entire article / publication, c) evaluation units (the order of the to-be-coded articles): order by date. Further, the development of coding rules for each category and the exemplification of each by setting anchor examples.
8	The conduction of the actual analysis: sighting the material, going through it, and ascribing categories. Afterwards follows a repetition of 7) and 8).
9	The interpretation and extraction of the findings in regard to the research question.
10	Lastly, the assurance of the scientific criteria of quality: validity and reliability. Further, the eight sub-criteria developed by Mayring: a) exactness, b) semantic quality, c) reproducibility, d) stability, as well as e) correlative, f) prediction, g) sample and h) construct validity.

Table 2: A QCA's Ten-Step Approach

2.4. Delimitations of the Analysis

Despite the valuable results the empirical analysis has provided, this thesis faces limitations. The most severe limitation has to do with the data availability. While retrieving the data, I have faced several website failures. Sources, I had initially envisioned to deploy in the analysis, became entire unavailable due to sudden breakdown of the online archives. However, I chose to counter this limitation by resorting to a different media outlet run by the same company.

Another limitation is the language, not only in regard to Putin's publications, but also the Zimbabwean media sources. While the English version of Putin's publications might have been a milder variant, a quick translation with my limited Russian abilities and a translation software have shown that the translations seem accurate. However, certain words and phrases in Russian may be sharper than the English counterparts, yet this remains outside of my comprehension abilities. On the Zimbabwean side, an analysis of the Shona or Ndebele⁹ speaking media sources would have been an interesting addition to the analysis. An analysis of those might be especially interesting as there could be a change in the style of narration due to a change in the audience. However, this research is not trying to generalize its findings but to deliver in-depth insights to the specific case at hand.

Moreover, an analysis of government speeches and releases could have been beneficiary for an even more thorough assessment of the narrative's salience. Going along with that, an analysis of the public opinion as well as oppositional groups or media companies could be a valuable contribution to the research. Nevertheless, one needs to keep in mind that the Zimbabwean civil society faces severe

⁹ Shona and Ndebele are only two of 16 Zimbabwean official languages, yet English, Shona and Ndebele are the most common.

repression through the Zimbabwean government, posing the question if the public opinion would even differ that greatly from official government lines. To counter this further research could focus on the London-based New Zimbabwe which remains critical to the government to some extent (Freedom House, 2024; Reporters Without Borders, 2023).

Arguably, the choice of *only* analyzing three of Putin's publications could be considered a limitation of the analysis. However, this thesis only examines Putin's deployed strategic narrative and its mirroring in the Zimbabwean media. Examining possible changes over time is beyond the scope of the research question this thesis follows. Yet, this research is not trying to analyze the general Russian strategic narrative but the specific narrative used for the full-scale invasion in Ukraine in February 2022. Therefore, this thesis is not attempting to make big claims about general narratives deployed but more as a sample to start with. Furthermore, the three chosen publications provide such a dense dataset that an analysis of less relevant and more superficial data would not be expedient.

Nevertheless the limitations the empirical analysis faced, the chosen method guarantees an advantage as it delivers detailed insights into the construction and projection of the Russian foreign policy narrative. Furthermore, a pool of even more data and its analysis is beyond the abilities a master's thesis can handle. As this thesis argues qualitatively and hence, does not try to generalize its findings, the analyzed data deems more than sufficient to answer the research question(s). The method also, fulfils the scientific quality criteria: reliability, reproduction and validity (Oswald, 2019).

3. Empirical Analysis

3.1. Contextualization of the Publications

Over two years ago, on February 24th 2022, Russian troops invaded Ukraine. Ever since a war of aggression with increasing harshness and destruction takes place. The numbers of victims are unknown, but by the end of 2023 the UNHCR has registered of 6.5 million refugees from Ukraine and approximately 3.6 million refugees within the Ukrainian borders. These numbers make the Russian war of aggression one of the biggest crises of expulsion on the globe. More than 10.000 civilians have died in Ukraine and more than 1.4 million people in eastern Ukraine have no access to running water. As a reaction to the Russian aggression the NATO- and EU- states have agreed on encompassing sanctions against Russia. Moreover, Ukraine receives not only humanitarian aid but also weapons and munition to defend the nation (Stent, 2019; Umland, 2024).

Based on Putin's understanding that Ukraine and Russia are not two separate nations, Ukraine has always "represented a double challenge" (Stent, 2019, p. 192). Putin has repeatedly referred to Ukraine as the birthplace of modern Russia due to the legacy of the *Kievan Rus*. The eastern Slavic Kievan Rus, as known today, originate in modern Scandinavia and inhabited parts of "Western Russia and Ukraine" (Stent, 2019, p. 177). Nevertheless, the identity of the Kievan Rus plays into the modern Russian national identity until today (Stent, 2019).

3.1.1. The Roots of the Conflict: The Orange Revolution and Euromaidan 2013

The roots of the conflict lie within the *European* turn of the Ukrainian civil society. In 2004, the Orange Revolution called protesters into the streets, who expressed their dissatisfaction with the rigged presidential elections of the country. In the preceding presidential elections, the Kremlin-backed Viktor Yanukovych won the elections, despite the huge support of the reformist rival Viktor Yushchenko. The color orange hereby refers to the color of the oppositional candidate, Yushchenko. The peaceful protests resulted in a repetition of the election, determining Yushchenko as the rightful winner. Further, protesters demanded a Ukrainian orientation to the West and Europe, increasing the confrontation with the Kremlin in the following years (Dickinson, 2022; Dr. Klein, 2023).

The tension in regard to the European turn of Ukraine also manifested during the second European turn: on November 29th, 2013, the so-called Euromaidan-protests broke out as Yanukovych changed the decision to sign an association agreement with the EU in the last moment. However, the tension over whether Ukraine tends to Russia / Europe has been a subject for more than three decades. Since the breakdown of the USSR and the resulting integration of the Crimean Peninsula into independent Ukraine, Ukraine's civic society is split up: while northern and western regions are highlighting the proximity to Europe, the southern and eastern region express a connection towards the Russian Federation. In 2004, as a result of the *Orange Revolution*, pro-Western politicians came into power. Six years later, in 2010, the situation has been reset as the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych was elected (Lankina & Watanabe, 2017; Romenskyy et. al., 2018).

While the protest originated on Maidan¹⁰-square in Kyiv, they quickly spread over the entire Ukrainian territory. Previously, on November 9th 2013, Yanukovich met with Putin to discuss the necessary steps for Ukraine to join the Eurasian Customs Union (EACU) alongside Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. This meeting fueled up the protesters even more. Pro-European voices argued that the Russian offer might have been more beneficial in the short term, but a turn to Europe on the other hand offers a chance for a sustainable change of the Ukrainian political system. The Euromaidan protesters hence, did not only protest *for* Europe, but much rather to remove the ruling party, including Yanukovich, as he stood for “intensified cronyism, corruption and economic decline” (Wolczuk & Wolczuk, 2013). Nevertheless, the violent shutdown of Euromaidan through Berkut units during the night of November 30th, 2013, protesters immediately reoccupied Maidan-square on December 1st 2013. Further attempts to suppress the protests through novel laws and a meeting between Putin and Yanukovich on December 6th 2013, the protests just intensified further (Lankina & Watanabe, 2017; Marples, 2013; Romenskyy et al., 2018; Stent, 2019; Wolczuk & Wolczuk, 2013).

In January 2014, Yanukovich’s government past 10 anti-protest laws which themselves violated basic human rights of the Ukrainian citizens. Those strict anti-democratic measures are similar to laws passed in the Russian Federation. Due to the newly introduced laws, the Ukrainian anti-government protests were criminalized and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) declared as *foreign agents* (Lally, 2014).

¹⁰ ‘Maidan’ translates to independence.

An agreement between opposition and government in February 2014 led to Yanukovych fleeing the country. The formation of the agreement came into place due to the help of EU-leaders (Lankina & Watanabe, 2017; Marples, 2013; Romenskyy et al., 2018; Stent, 2019; Wolczuk & Wolczuk, 2013).

Russia characterized the protests as a turn to Europeanisation. The Western support and involvement to further stir Ukraine in that direction was perceived as an affront against Russia and led to the Kremlin expressing its concern. The Kremlin has argued that the Western involvement has to be seen as an *intervention* in their “are of strategic interest” (Lankina & Watanabe, 2017, p. 1528).

3.1.2. A First Peak: The Annexation of Crimea and an Outbreak of War in Eastern Ukraine

The conflictual situation peaked with the annexation of Crimea through the Kremlin in 2014. On February 27th 2014, the so-called *little green men*¹¹ stormed strategic buildings as well as crucial infrastructure on Crimea. Moreover, they stormed and then occupied the regional parliament in Simferopol and managed to pin down the Ukrainian forces in their army bases. In the following month the regional parliament held a referendum about the status of Crimea. Nevertheless, only pro-Russian electives present and the referendum took place under military observation and the occupation of Russian forces (Boyd-Barrett, 2017; Shevchenko, 2014).

Further, separatist movements strove for independence from Ukraine in eastern Ukrainian oblasti. Supported by Russia, they induced a war in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti. Both oblasti were – according to the official Russian version –

¹¹ The ‘little green men’ are masked pro-Russian armed forces lacking any (military) badges and markings on their uniforms. The term stems from Western media.

independent people's republics. Whilst actually being established through the Russian secret service and supported through regular Russian troops from an early stage. Moreover, the population in both oblasts the population was mainly ethnically Russian. Since the conflict's beginning, the Ukrainian armed forces continuously battled the separatists. Until the beginning of 2022 approximately 14.0000 people have fallen victim to the conflict. On February 21st 2022, Putin officially acknowledged the government in Donetsk and Luhansk, but further accused the Ukrainian government of planned genocide against the Russian population on Ukrainian ground (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (bpb), 2024; Shevchenko, 2014; Stent, 2019).

3.1.3. War Development Since February 2022

Within the first days of war the Russian troops managed to gain much access into the Ukrainian territory: battles took place in suburbs of Kyiv and Kharkiv, Kherson and Melitopol fell under Russian occupation. However, the Ukrainian armed forces managed to fight back the Russian from the northern territories, yet Mariupol – strategically important located at the Black Sea – fell under Russian control. After the regain of territories, the nearly complete freeing of Kharkiv oblast, and the advance to Dnipro, throughout later 2022, the 1.300-kilometer-long front line has barely faced huge changes. Approximately 17.5% of the Ukrainian territory are occupied by Russian troops (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (bpb), 2024).

Starting in fall 2023, the Russian troops managed to stabilize the front line, while the Ukrainian spring offensive of the same year brought nearly no changes to the conflict environment and thus is considered as having failed. The conflict spreads deep into the Ukrainian inland: according to UN sources, between August and October 2023 nearly half of the civilian victims died far from the front. Russia continues

to bombard Ukrainian cities using various long-range weapons en masse and in a targeted manner, while Ukraine started attacking aims within the Russian territories as well. Russian targets in Ukraine include civilian facilities, including residential, commercial, cultural and hospital buildings, schools and churches. Other Russian aims are of critical infrastructure: the Kakhovka-dam or energy infrastructure, crucial for the civil society. Moreover, abduction, torture, mutilation, rape, and murder as well as other human rights crimes against Ukrainian civilians in the occupied parts of the country are considered to be part of Russian warfare. This also includes the deportation of tens of thousands of Ukrainian underage- as well adult-citizens and the theft of Ukrainian grain supplies (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (bpb), 2024; Umland, 2024).

3.1.4. The Russian-Zimbabwean Relationship

In October 2019, the Russia-Africa Summit drew attention to the increasing Russian interest in the African continent. Russian engagements are often associated with efforts of the decolonialization era, meddling in elections, nuclear projects and arms deals. Nevertheless, the smaller economic presence in comparison with China, the Russian Federation remains an important player on the African continent. As a result of 2014, Western states posed sanctions on Russian firms and individuals, leading to an increase of activities on the African continent with the Russia-Africa Summit being an image of this new policy (Kachur, 2020).

Already during the British colonial rule, the USSR backed the Zimbabwe Africa People's Union (ZAPU) as well as the later Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe and his party the Zimbabwe Africa National Union (ZANU). Supporting the freedom fighters with equipment and logistical support, the USSR encouraged the Zimbabwean struggle for independence (Gadzikwa et al., 2023).

3.1.5. A Socialist Relationship: Zimbabwe after Independence

After gaining independence in 1980, Zimbabwe “emerged as a socialist state” (Chigora & Goredema, 2010, p. 190), merging socialism with some capitalist traits. While an agreement for the establishment of a diplomatic relationship came into force on February 18th, 1981, the USSR has already supported the struggle against colonialism and imperialism before. Both patriotic forces, ZANU and ZAPU, were following a socialist ideology, enabling thorough assistance through the USSR. Through “women’s delegations, trade unionists, agricultural experts, diplomats and academics from Zimbabwe” travelling to the USSR and receiving training, deepened the relationship and widened the diplomatic efforts. The Russian-Zimbabwean relationship came to a temporary standstill due to the breakdown of the USSR in 1991, before picking up again in the 21st century. This was a result of the Western response to Mugabe’s *Land Reform Program* of 2000¹²: as after Western retreat the investments decreased and the Zimbabwean economy went into a free fall (Chigora & Goredema, 2010).

3.1.6. Zimbabwe’s ‘Look-East Policy’

The Western imposed sanctions led Zimbabwean leaders to turn to the East for support. Manifesting in the *Look East Policy*, Zimbabwe and Russia increasingly supported each other within the international system. Sharing a common foreign policy approach of non-interference and non-intervention, Zimbabwe and the Russian Federation shared a common antagonist view of the US-foreign policy. An

¹² Land Reform Program (2000): Land reform programs had been introduced with the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980. In 2000 Mugabe’s newly established government followed a more aggressive approach manifesting in the Lancaster Agreement. Referred to as the Third Chimurenga (Chimurenga is used to describe the anti-colonial uprisings in the 20th century), the Land Reform Program was a mirror image of the heightened tensions between Africans and Whites over the land ownership. Mugabe’s ruling party, ZANU-PF, has exploited the program to score political points among Africans. The shadow of the opportunistic use led to struggles over Zimbabwean land that continue until today (Mlambo, 2005; Nyawo & Shava, 2010, 275).

example of this is the Russian and Chinese veto during the US-led UN-vote of imposing sanctions on Zimbabwe in 2008. In response, Zimbabwe has voted against the UN resolution “on Ukraine’s territorial integrity” (Gadzwika et. al., 2023, p. 275). Since the early 2000s, the Kremlin has supported the Zimbabwean domestic development, while Western nations have opposed. The common interest among the Russian and Zimbabwean government is thought of having enhanced and deepened the relationship between the two nations. In 2010, Mugabe stated that the *Look East Policy* of Zimbabwe will also guide the nation in the future (Chigora & Gordema, 2010; Gadzwika, et. al., 2023).

3.2. A Putin-Constructed Narrative

The analyzed publications by Putin, has a clearly identifiable narrator: the President of Russia Vladimir Putin. Putin uses language to narrate a storyline containing actors, a setting, and then imbeds both within a conflict surrounding (the employment) (see **Table 3: Putin’s Strategic Narrative**).

Narrative components (deriving from theory)	Narrative components (evident in the publications)
Actors and character traits	The Russian Federation: a coherent, morally right actor
	The West (US, NATO, EU): an incoherent, unethical actor
	Manifesting their relationship: the collective versus the individual (the West against Russia)
Setting	Historical analogies and Soviet determinants
	A peaceful Russia today is based on the peaceful USSR
	The Western destructivism endangering the international system
	A dysfunctional and dangerous international system
	Western actions are an affront against Russia
Employment	The Russian Federation acting with rationality in a system that is determined through irrationality
	The conflict’s substance: a clash of powers on Ukrainian soil
	The international system’s injustice is confronted with Russian lawful actions
	The Russian objectives: reaching security for all
	The Western objectives: reaching destruction
	Credit to the Russian Federation for protection
Blame to NATO (as the embodiment of the West) for a situation of conflict	

Table 3: Putin’s Strategic Narrative

In the following paragraphs these components as results of the narrative analysis will be introduced and discussed.

3.2.1. *The Actors: A Collective West Against Russia*

The detected narrative distinguishes between the characterization of the self and the other. The former entails the “new, modern Russia” (Putin, 2022a) as an individual actor, opposed by the *other*. The latter, the West – especially the US – is characterized as the collective opponent, as NATO “merely serves as a tool of US foreign Policy” (Putin, 2022a). While the characteristics of the Russian Federation are honorable, such as “justice and truth” (Putin, 2022a) and “respectful” (Putin, 2022b), the West withhold a “contemptuous and disdainful attitude” (Putin, 2022a). The West also is prone to empty promises and verbal reassurances which turn out to have no value for the Russian Federation (Putin, 2022b). The character traits further mirror in the presented behavioral traits of narrative’s actors: Russia shows “bold and immediate action” (Putin, 2022a) or being “open to dialogue” (Putin, 2022b) to achieve their “interests and legitimate demands” (Putin, 2022a); the West is attempting “pressure and blackmail” (Putin, 2022a) while the interests remain completely unilluminated. Moreover, the Western powers have installed Ukraine which thus functions as a mirror of Western actions as well as an “anti-Russia project” (Putin, 2021).

The lack of coherence regarding the West also mirrors in the narrated decision-making processes. Putin does not shed any light on underlying decision-making processes the West might undergo within the international system. Russia on the other hand, had to undergo *trials*, influencing their role, behavior, and mainly decision-making processes in and in regard to the international system (Putin, 2022a). The Russian Federation displays decision-making processes which are determined

through “openness and goodwill” (Putin, 2021). Hence, the Russian Federation is presented as an open actor who “will never be *anti-Ukraine*” (Putin, 2021).

3.2.2. *The Setting: History Determines the Present*

Further, the constructed narrative deploys an extensive characterization of the setting. Hereby, Putin uses historical analogies to imbed the narrative in a greater temporal context and connotes the current events as a result of the development of the “past 30 years” (Putin, 2022a). Further, the historical analogy is used to prove the peaceful and *honorable* character of the Russian Federation (and before the Soviet Union). Thus, the current foreign policy and position in the international system is characterized as the result of the historical struggle the Soviet Union faced. Another important historical analogy is the destructivism the West used against the USSR, ultimately leading to the breakdown of the Soviet Union (Putin, 2022a; Putin, 2022b). Moreover, Putin uses history to emphasize the importance Ukraine holds for the Russian Federation as those territories had “historically been Russian” (Putin, 2021). Putin also highlights this perception through describing Ukraine as the Russian periphery (Putin, 2021).

Those historical analogies are also used to describe the functionalities of the international system itself. Through constant references to WW2 as well as describing the Ukrainian government as “radicals and neo-Nazis” (Putin, 2021), Putin draws an analogy between the current struggle between Russia and the West and the USSR fighting the ultimate cruelty of the Third Reich during WW2. Since the current international system is based on the *wrongdoings* of the West, as the required actions are imbedded in a “system of international relations, and sometimes even US allies” (Putin, 2022a) (Putin, 2022b).

This system is characterized through a

“kind of modern absolutism coupled with the low cultural standards and arrogance of those who formulated and pushed through decisions that suited only themselves [the West]”
(Putin, 2022a).

One of these decision manifests in Putin’s perception of the global arms trade or the “constant flow of Western weapons to Ukraine, with the whole world watching” (Putin, 2022b). Putin thus does not only emphasize the leading role the West takes within the international system, but much more states the acceptance of the international system’s rest to simply *align* with those wrongdoings rather than standing up for what is right.

The *open* decision-making processes therefore are determined through the importance: “a matter of life and death” (Putin, 2022a). This deems crucial as the involved stakes are presented as “key aspects of ensuring the security of Russia” (Putin, 2022a) and Ukraine being an “inalienable part of our [the Russian] own history, culture and spiritual space” (Putin, 2022b). While the Western actions are defined as inappropriate behavior, the Russian actions are appropriate as they are carried out “professionally, smoothly, patiently, and with due regard and respect for the interests and one’s own responsibility” (Putin, 2022a).

To summarize, Putin narrates a version of Ukraine in which he denies Ukrainians their independence by on the one hand constantly referring to the shared historical unity; on the other hand, he narrates Ukraine as a being fully under Western influence as the conflict with the West manifests on Ukrainian soil. Ukraine, according to Putin is theoretically a *good* nation under the umbrella of the Russkiy mir, yet is

infiltrated by Western negative influence leading to the immediate conflict situation: Ukraine has gone bad. Thus, historicity serves as a legitimizing factor of the present within the Putin-constructed narrative.

3.2.3. The Emplotment: A Situation of Conflict

Moreover, the setting lays the ground for the conflict – the clash between right (Russia) and wrong (the West) with Russia as the “publicly designated [...] enemy” (Putin, 2022a). The immediate danger is thus the constant of the Western “military machine” (Putin, 2022a) and calls for no other action than the defense of Russia. The Western involvement in Ukraine could also be considered as weapons of mass destruction (Putin, 2021). As Ukraine is merely a “tool in someone else’s hands to fight against us [the Russian Federation]” (Putin, 2021), Russia finds itself in a situation of direct conflict. Another factor contributing to this conflict is the building of military bases by NATO on Ukrainian ground to attack Russia further (Putin, 2022b).

Putin presents the Russian Armed Forces and its soldiers as the appropriate means to carry out the pre-defined action to resolve the conflictual situation and grants them with “every right to respond to ensure [...] security” (Putin, 2022b). Nevertheless, the road to resolution is also presented as lawful, as it is taking place in accordance with, generally acknowledged, international law and regulations. The defined objectives, presented by Putin, are to “protect, demilitarize, [and] denazify” (Putin, 2022a). The defined objectives of the West on the other hand are to “finish us [the Russian Federation] off” (Putin, 2022a). Putin’s narrated Western heightened aggression further legitimizes the Kremlin to invest any sort of force needed. Especially by referring to weapons of mass destruction highlights Putin’s notion that an over-exaggeration does not exist in responding to the Western destructivism (Putin, 2021).

A difference between Russia and the West also mirrors in distinguishing between what is a *success*: while for Russia it is the Russian-Ukrainian “common future” (Putin, 2022a); the West aims to “destroy our [the Russian] traditional values and force their [Western] false values that would erode us [the Russian Federation]” (Putin, 2022a). Moreover, the Russian Federation holds an obligation to protect those at stake and hence is to take credit for a successful defense. Lastly, the leading elite of NATO is to blame for the current situation (Putin, 2022b).

Through the use of a clear distinction between what is right / wrong and good / bad, Putin constructs a narrative in which the international system functions as playground for US-dominated politics that result in a morally corrupt environment which Russia has to protect its good space from. Ukraine holds no real role in the narrative itself other than being the arena where the showdown between good and bad is taking place. Moreover, the anti-Russian sentiment displayed by Ukraine is narrated as being the product of a carefully crafted information operation by the West. Putin stresses the Russian importance to stand by Ukraine on its fight to freedom and proposes the only solution for Ukraine to gain sovereignty: the Kremlin’s leadership in the international system. Furthermore, Putin characterizes everyone who’s thinking does not align with the own approach as the *evil other*. Hence, the conflict is the clash between Russia as the only loyal player, clashing with an incoherent and morally inferior West.

In conclusion, Putin constructs a narrative that weaves together history and the present to bend facts in order to determine the future. In this regard, the future is the preferred outcome of achieving the Russian aims within the international system. Putin’s developed narrative, strategically uses the narrative components to frame

the conflict in Ukraine as Western actions targeted against the Russian Federation that require an immediate response by the Kremlin.

3.3. The Strategic Narrative in the Zimbabwean Media

The following chapter will describe how Putin's identified foreign policy narrative mirrors in the Zimbabwean media. In general, the Russian strategic narrative mirrors insofar as ZBC News and The Sunday Mail have fully accepted the Russian storytelling: while the different categories of analysis align with the Putin-constructed narrative (see **Table 3: Putin's Strategic Narrative**, chapter 4.2. *A Putin-Constructed Narrative*), the media outlets have used different sub-categories, to embellish the mirrored narrative. Therefore, the media outlets do not simply align with the Russian-constructed narrative but build upon them.

3.3.1. Russia, the West, and Their Relationship

The media present a thorough characterization of those acting within the international system. While the Russian Federation is presented as an actor with good intentions, the Western states are presented with a highly negative connotation. Moreover, the narrative uses NATO, the US, the EU, and the West interchangeably and makes no difference in a characterization: the West is simultaneously NATO, EU and US.

3.3.1.1. The Russian Federation: a Moral Superpower

The Russian Federation, presented as lawful, coherent and morally superior, is subject to a detailed characterization through the Zimbabwean media. A description of Russia as "peaceful" (Rupapa, 2022) underlines this impression.

As Russia is a "superpower" (Mutambara, 2023) or a nation with the status of a great power, the Russian Federation also takes upon leading roles. The

Zimbabwean media state that the “Russian Federation is the most advanced country in the world” (Rupapa, 2023) and thus constructs an image in which an association with Russia is beneficial for partners as it leads to positive impact (Rudzido, 2022). Hence, Russia is characterized as a favorable, desirable partner and actor in the international system. This assessment manifests itself in the highlighting of “a few dozen [Ukrainian] servicemen switching to the Russian side” (ZBC News, 2023a).

Further, the desirableness of associating with Russia also is characterized through reliability of the Russian Federation, leading to serious intentions in the relationship as well as deepened partnerships. Moreover, the Zimbabwean media present the seriousness of the Russian behavior as conscious within the international system: the Russian Federation promotes peace. Through the safeguarding of “peace and stability” (The Sunday Mail, 2023a), the Kremlin’s behavior is not only favorable or desirable, but the **only** morally correct way of behaving. While actions taken by the Russian Federation are associated (The Sunday Mail, 2023a) with the law, the actions are often described detailed, allowing for an easy comprehension of decision-making processes that are taken (The Sunday Mail, 2023b).

To put it briefly, the Russian Federation and the Russian decision-making body are described as an actor that is beneficial to both sides. A sort of moral superpower that will not impose itself on the globe and other countries, but one that any country would desire to cooperate with. ZBC News and The Sunday Mail describe Russia a leading nation capable of positive change through normative channels.

3.3.1.2. The West: An Incoherent Group of States

Not only, lacks the West coherence in regard to naming it, but moreover the behavior is described as difficult or even impossible to comprehend, making it

morally incorrect. “Particularly mischievous actions of the Western” (Kortunov, 2023) alliance, lead to a characterization that the displayed behavior is unethical. Further, the Western nations are behaving in a groundless and unreasonable manner. An example of this characterization is the description of Western behavior as “total irrational jingoism” (Mutambara, 2022). Jingoism could also be described as a war-like foreign policy. Thus, the Western behavior does not only lack coherence but is also described as inadequate and *over the top*.

While these characterizations rather describe the behavioral traits, the Zimbabwean media do not fail to narrate concrete character traits of the Western alliance. Therefore, the narration of situational awareness is characterized through the absence of a complex assessment-ability. The narration describes the West as using a sort of *one-size-fits-all approach*, lumping conflicts and foreign policy events together without reflecting on the impact such behavior might have. The simple West thus, “does not augur well for creating intelligent and nuanced understanding of global affairs” (Mutambara, 2022). This applied Western simplicity and complete lack of a sophistication is also brought into connection with an arrogant understanding of the international system, in which *the West knows better anyway* (Mutambara, 2022).

Lastly, the Zimbabwean media highlight the role of the Western media as part of the Western bloc. Through the same simple behavioral traits, the Western media do not present a reflected image of (global) affairs and developments, but much rather reproduces the pre-existent worldviews, which are imposed through the particular governments of Western nations.

The Zimbabwean media highlight this frame of the narrative by describing Western media outlets as

“media outlets which do not question these foolish foreign policy pronouncements but act as echo chambers of the unintelligent posturing by Western leaders”

(Mutambara, 2022).

To summarize, the narration of the West, including NATO, the EU, and the US, lacks a multi-layered approach and is marked through the arrogance of believing that the morally incoherent and irrational *one-size-approach* fits all foreign policy scenarios. Through such an approach the West is not only displaying arrogance by a know-it-all behavior, but also lacks the finetuned understanding of nuanced differences between each state on earth. The Zimbabwean media outlets highlight that Western media sources are simply reproducing the pre-existing views of Western governments. Hence, they do not engage in a reflected journalistic manner and mirror their governments behavior.

3.3.1.3. An Individual Versus the Collective

But the actors are not only characterized individually, but the narrative also acknowledges the relationship the two actors hold. Through constantly referring to the individual versus collective character of their relationship by the Zimbabwean media, an image of a nearly *David-versus-Goliath* relationship manifests itself. Russia, “independent from the West” (Mutambara, 2022), “counteracts” (Mutambara, 2022) Western behavior.

The description of the relationship between the actors in the Zimbabwean articles fully mirrors the relationship Putin narrates within those publications preceding

the Russian war in Ukraine. The Russian Federation functions as form of defender against those threatening the country. By narrating such a story, the media outlets also embed their own struggle with the Western countries – e.g. posed sanctions – in the relationship the West and Russia display. Though Russia is the individual actor in the narrative, it manages to embrace Zimbabwe in its own struggle.

3.3.2. *A Dysfunctional and Corrupt International System*

The default state of the Russian foreign policy narrative is a dysfunctional international system determined through Western destructivism, which mirrors in the Zimbabwean media outlets. The actions of the West and their encouragement to join NATO “since it is a sovereign nation” (Mutambara, 2022) is described as a “naïve” (Mutambara, 2022) action or “primitive ignorance” (Mutambara, 2022). Further, the “self-serving intellectual ineptitude” (Mutambara, 2022), narrated by the Zimbabwean media, frames the Western actions as ignorant, self-absorbed, and a complete lack of circumspection as well as respect for their surroundings. This perception also mirrors in the framing of the West imposing itself on other nations within the international system. The “West’s unquenchable thirst to dominate” (Mandovha, 2023) underlines the imposed Western hegemony in the international system. Thus, the Western train of action, as well as forceful imposing, “inflames conflict” (Mutambara, 2022) within the dysfunctionality of the international system.

Through these narrations, the Zimbabwean public media create an image of a sort of unstable international surrounding, in which the Western states are, through their role as US-led hegemons – able to impose their ‘*crooked*’ ideas on other states. Hereby are presented as further destabilizing the system as their decision-making processes deem conflict-inducing. Further, the Western imposed hegemony leads to an international system displaying exactly the same values the Western states

follow. The Zimbabwean media hence, create an image in which the involuntarily accepted Western-led hegemony is an unbeneficial, corrupt surrounding.

3.3.2.1. Historical Analogies or why the Past Matters Today

Nevertheless the current state of the international system, the narrative also embraces the historical analogies and determinants. The role of the USSR and its breakdown are then narrated as influencing the international relations heavily in the current arena. As Zimbabwean media outlets refer to the antagonism between Russia and the West as “current and historical opponents” (Mutambara, 2022), the media weaves the past and present together to present it as one. Further, the current Russian state is presented as being influenced through the downfall as follows:

“Between 1989 and 1992, the Warsaw Pact collapsed, and the USSR disintegrated with the Soviet republics becoming independent nations such as Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Estonia and Belarus. Russia remained a superpower, having inherited the bulk of the Soviet military and industrial strength, particularly a potent nuclear arsenal”
(Mutambara, 2022).

Within the narrative, historicity also plays a role in describing the antagonism between the Russian Federation and the West. The dichotomy of the historic antagonist’s shape the security landscape until today: by referring to NATO as the Western military alliance, leading to the establishment of the Warsaw pact on the one hand; and at the same time using NATO exchangeable with the Western states. Through this narration of the international system, the ZBC News and The Sunday Mail are able to embed the current actions of the West (NATO) in a greater historical context in which the USSR (Russia) had to defend itself.

3.3.2.2. Russia's Need for Self-Defense

Based on the historic determinants as well as the current international system, the Western decision-making processes and resulting actions within Putin's foreign policy narrative are described as "completely undermining Russia" (Mutambara, 2022). In particular the NATO expansion is narrated by the Zimbabwean media as a continuous provocation of the Russian Federation. Even though Russia is displaying rational behavior, as it is based on "common sense" (Mutambara, 2022), the Zimbabwean media describes NATO as threatening to Russia. Ukraine – as the embodiment of this conflict – therefore, is the pinnacle of the expansive Western behavior. Therefore, the Zimbabwean media state:

"that Ukraine must remain independent, but should not join NATO [...]. Ukraine has a nearly 2000km border with Russia, and its joining of NATO leads to the total encirclement of Russia"
(Mutambara, 2022).

While the Western imposed hegemony is pushing Russia into action while the international system is scattered by that, the Russian Federation is taking a rational decision-making approach in Putin's narrative. Further, the Zimbabwean media describes the Russian Federation as transparent (in their conduct of warfare). Through detailed descriptions of maneuvers or decisions leading to certain event, ZBC News and The Sunday Mail are framing the Russian actions as clear decision-making processes to the audience. This further manifests in the cruciality of the Russian decision-making to ensure their position in the international system – portrayed through the Zimbabwean media – as the Russian Federation holds "major security concerns" (Mutambara, 2022).

In conclusion, the Zimbabwean media outlets are able to frame the Russian actions and underlying decision-making processes as crucial to produce order within a system, whereas the West is responsible for daily disorder. Further, these decisions deem crucial as they defend the Russian Federation from being dragged into said (immoral) chaos.

3.3.3. *A Russian-led Solution to the Current Misstate*

The Russian foreign policy narrative also mirrors in regard to the emplotment in the analyzed Zimbabwean media outlets. Main focus of the emplotment is the conflict substance: a clash between two powers. In this context powers refers by no means to Russia fighting Ukraine, but more to Russia fighting the West in Ukraine. By referring to Ukraine as a Western “puppet government” (ZBC News, 2023e), the media outlets make it clear that Ukraine is solely a proxy or prolonged arm of the Western states. In the same understanding, the Zimbabwean media also deprive the Ukrainian government from taking its own decisions and therefore, presenting the war’s reason as the Western actions committed against Russia through Ukraine. As the West entangled Ukraine due to a lack of understanding “geo-strategic considerations” (Mutambara, 2022).

Going along with that, the involvement of both conflict parties is equated within the narrative. Neither Ukraine, nor the Russian Federation hold the blame for the continuation of the conflict, as the war is “pitting Russia and Ukraine” (Kafe, 2022). However, the Zimbabwean narration also entails a description of the situation as a crisis or conflict, rather than a full-scale war (The Sunday Mail, 2022). The Ukrainian “dramatic performance” (Kortunov, 2023) and staged actions, described by ZBC News and The Sunday Mail therefore, overdramatize the situation by *making it seem like* a full-scale war. Furthermore, the media outlets link Ukraine to the neo-colonial

Western values and behavior. An example of this is the description of Ukrainian authorities hindering black people of crossing the border when fleeing from Ukraine (Dzenga, 2022). Dzenga provides a detailed description experiences of Zimbabwean students trying to flee Ukraine and the racism they experience from Ukrainian border guards. Through this characterization of the conflict, the Zimbabwean media are able to use Ukraine as a sort of magnifying glass of the dysfunctionalities of the international system. Again, Ukraine functions as a mirror of negative Western influence: in this case through displaying racist behavior. Thus, the conflict is presented as holding influence over the Zimbabwean security landscape as well.

Moreover, the narrated conflict substance entails a description of the actions induced by the Kremlin. The Zimbabwean media stress the Russian approach and concrete diplomatic efforts as a path to resolving the *conflict*. The former entails the open decision-making processes led by the principles of the “multipolar world order” (Madonko, 2023). The latter describes actions such as the re-imagination and reinvention of diplomacy to achieve a stable conflict solution (Mutambara, 2022). In more detail the Russian media described those efforts of diplomacy as follows:

“President Putin has shown us that he is ready to engage in dialogue and search for solutions and we need to convince the other party right now and I hope that we will be able to do that” (Madonko, 2023).

The Putin-constructed narrative component of a peace-seeking Russia engaging in diplomacy mirrors in the analyzed articles. The described efforts for peace are an instant solution to an undesirable status quo that the Kremlin is willing to solve under any circumstance. Ukraine, similar in the Putin-constructed narrative, is here not the real *enemy*, but the West that is feeding into the evil nature of the Ukrainian state.

The Zimbabwean media's narrative mirrors insofar as it aligns with Putin's characterization of a solution to the international system's insecurities.

3.3.3.1. The Conflict Danger: Western Actions as an Immediate Threat

While the *clash of powers* refers to the initial situation, the Western actions within in this surrounding are characterized as fueling the conflict further into escalation. As the main objective of the Western states is narrated as a guideline for further destruction in the already dysfunctional international system. The Western objectives within the narrative are therefore negatively connotated and brought into connection with the Western (US-led) imposed hegemony (Mutambara, 2022). Furthermore, the Zimbabwean media state that the West is following double standards, making it "hypocritical [and], deplorable" (The Sunday Mail, 2022). This behavior is influencing the conflict surrounding in a negative manner, as it opposes possible peace efforts and hence is considered a security concern through the Zimbabwean media.

Not only is Ukraine the puppet of Western actions, but also its army is militarily backed by the West, ZBC News and The Sunday Mail narrate. In addition to that Ukraine is using the Western support to use it in the same deceiving manner as the Western actions. By referring to "foreign aid as a money laundering scheme" (ZBC News, 2023b) and Zelensky "attempting to preserve the Ukrainian narrative in the US public" (Kortunov, 2023), the Zimbabwean media outlets create a narration in which Ukraine is using similar methods as the West while at the same time being victim to the deception the West deploys.

While Ukraine functions as a proxy, the West is deploying *over the top* responses to milder conflictual situations according to the Zimbabwean media outlets. The inadequacy of Western measures is additionally considered as “illegal” (The Sunday Mail, 2023b), and targeting individuals “all over the world” (The Sunday Mail, 2023b). Despite those Western responses, the Zimbabwean media highlight the failure of Western states to reach their aims, resulting in an even more dysfunctional system (ZBC News, 2023). ZBC News and The Sunday Mail further note that all those fruitless Western efforts to influence the conflict, is taking attention away from other wars / conflicts of relevance. The media outlets state:

“while the Russia-Ukraine conflict is under the spotlight the sufferings of people in such countries as Iraq and Afghanistan [...] are receiving less coverage”
(The Sunday Mail, 2022).

This quote highlights the Zimbabwean media’s assumption that the West, even though heavily involved in other conflicts as well, is heavily focused and involved in the Russian war in Ukraine. When accumulating the Western actions, one immediate threat is vehemently pointed out in the analyzed sources: the Western involvements and ultimate aim of destruction results in an evident threat of WW3. By bringing “humanity closer to the third world war” (ZBC News, 2023c), the Western objectives – as a guideline for destruction – are one step closer to being reached, the Zimbabwean media further narrate. Moreover, the Zimbabwean media ascribe direct blame to NATO as the embodiment of the West. NATO, responsible for the conflict’s outbreak, functions as a voice of the aggressive Western foreign policy (Mutambara, 2022).

Summarizing, the analyzed media outlets narrate a thorough description of the Western conflict approach leading to the ultimate destruction through the possibility

of a WW3. The previous characterization of Western incoherency and irrationality mirrors in the presented objectives and binds the possibilities of conflict-development together with the creation of an immediate danger to the Russian Federation as well as the rest of the world. Both media sources further mirror Putin's narration of not only Western hard security aims and hence, military aspiration – embodied by NATO – but also the soft power the West is trying to increase in the international system. Whilst the Russian values, morals and ethical behavior would lead to a more peaceful system, the Western morals and ethics could escalate the international system into a state of WW3.

3.3.3.2. The Russian Federation as a Lawful player aiming at Security and Protection

The difference between West and East also manifests in the aims of the Russian Federation throughout Putin's and the Zimbabwean media's narration. In Putin's constructed narrative the Russian Federation uses means in accordance with the (international) law to counter the international system's default state of injustice. The Zimbabwean media mirror this understanding, as The Sunday Mail states "Putin and the people of Russia are therefore within their rights to demand the demilitarization" (2023). While Russia is conducting their actions within a pro-active, peaceful manner; Ukraine – as the West – is seeking other, the Zimbabwean media state. Further ZBC News and The Sunday Mail state that by opposing the West, the Russian Federation is countering (neo-) colonialism and by that pays his effort in countering the global injustice (Madonko, 2023).

The Russian objectives defined in the foreign policy narrative as reaching security and multipolarity will be reached through a defensive use of force. The Zimbabwean media describe the West as the provocateur of Russian responses, while

Russian troops “complete liberation[s]” (ZBC News, 2023f) on Ukrainian territory. Those reasonable objectives are beneficial to the greater international community, the Zimbabwean media state. Further, the foreign policy narrative gives the credit for protecting not only its own people, but the international community to the Russian Federation. The Zimbabwean media outlets stress the possibility of vulnerability of Russia in the future, which has to be countered today. Therefore, the current efforts are considered as a cautionary measure, as “by invading Ukraine now, Putin is being preemptive” (Mutambara, 2022). Moreover, the Zimbabwean media narrate a storyline in which the Russian objectives seem very reachable through Russian military actions. An achievement of the Russian objective would hence not only counter Western actions, but lead to an increase in stability and peaceful relation in the international system (ZBC News, 2023d).

Through the thorough assessment of Russian strategy, the employment of the constructed narrative in the Zimbabwean media are able to justify the Russian foreign policy decision while embedding them in a greater international context. The audience can grasp the causal relationship of a situation unfolding while clearly distinguishing between the good (Russia) and the bad (the West / Ukraine). By narrating the Russian actions as peaceful and defensive, the Zimbabwean media outlets construct a clear pattern of how to respond to the perceived dangers the West poses.

Conclusion

The empirical analysis has demonstrated not only that there is an existent narrative within the Putin's publications, but the mirroring of said narrative within the articles published by the Zimbabwean media outlets ZBC News and The Sunday Mail. While the narrative analysis offers insights into the Putin-established narrative in regard to the full-scale invasion in Ukraine on February 24th 2022, the Zimbabwean media grasped these concepts and supplemented the previously constructed narrative. By supplementing those categories Putin constructed, with own interpretations of the international system, the Zimbabwean media narrates a story that is based on the Russian interpretation, yet is far more detailed and enriched with own experiences.

This also sheds light on the salience of the narrative. The Putin-constructed narrative, used as base for the analysis, thus functions as a sort of blueprint to then be developed further and to be imbedded in the Zimbabwean security context. However, the Zimbabwean mirroring of the narrative is not as clearly distinguishable as the Russian base: actor, setting and emplotment often overlap and determine one another. The characterization of an actor is often intertwined with an action taken in the conflict that is narrated.

Both, the Putin's base and the Zimbabwean media's mirroring, establish two actors with an antagonist relationship: the West and the Russian Federation. While the Russian Federation functions as a moral defender of those who might not be able to defend themselves, the West is seen as loose group of states following US-dominance. This manifests in the various interchangeable descriptions of the West, the EU, NATO and the US. Western states moreover, lack the ability to comprehend

complexity. By lumping everyone together, Western states arrogantly assume to have a one-size-fits-all solution that fully ignores the storylines of those targeted by Western aggressive behavior. This results in a situation in which the Kremlin is not subject to application of standard rules of the international system, and moreover should be allowed to act accordingly – rather than anyone else. The Russia-West relationship is so crucial in determining the behavior and character traits that it becomes part of the actor's self. The Kremlin finds itself continuously in a *defending* position against the Western perpetual teasing, allowing to use all means necessary and resulting in a sort of Russian *exceptionalism*: while laws apply to everyone else, the Russian morality stands above it all.

Within the narrative and its mirroring, the setting describes a dysfunctional status quo. By the Western-imposed hegemony on the international system, the West is further contributing to the dysfunctionality. As Western states are led by morally corrupt principles, they are threatening this fragile status quo and challenge those who think different. Supplementing the status quo by historical determinants from the Soviet era, the narrative strategically frames current grievances within a broader context. Therefore, the principles of the international system adhere to the following principle: the Western destructional foreign policy has consolidated the dysfunctional status quo through morally corrupt decision-making processes, the Kremlin has no other choice than opposing Western actions.

Putin narrates the struggle between East and West as a tale as old as time. In this understanding the history does determine present as the international system is the result of a continuous misbehavior of Western states targeting those who do not fit the Western conceptualization of statehood – or put simply: accept the Western imposed dominance and hegemony. As the Russian Federation and its allies

have understood this rationale, they have accepted cruciality of the need for self-defense. Through rationality the Kremlin as well as its allies is able to withstand the possibility of being *dragged* into the immorality and chaos caused by Western governments.

In the Russian ground for and the Zimbabwean mirroring of the narrative, the West is described as the ultimate evil aiming at the final destruction of the world, while a Russian-led approach solves the current misstate. The Zimbabwean media and Putin narrate a two-pronged version of Ukraine: on the one hand, Ukraine is a victim of the negative Western influence and thus Ukraine displays the same mischievous tendencies to gain support amongst the West; whereas on the other hand, Ukraine serves as the battleground of a much bigger moral battle: a fight for righteousness, peace and a stable world order determined through multipolarity. By mirroring the Russian narrative and supplementing it, the Zimbabwean media is narrating a version of Russia in which the Kremlin fights for all those suppressed by the West.

Yet the Zimbabwean media outlets do not only narrate a continuous struggle between East and West, but also the dangerous outcome a win of the Western states poses. In case of a Western win, the international system faces the immediate threat of WW3, resulting in the ultimate destruction. In this narration, Ukraine is an example of this destruction and hence, needs to be countered for the own (Russian) security purposes. As Western actions are narrated as posing an immediate threat to Russia – and in a broader sense, the Zimbabwean security landscape – a win in Ukraine means successfully defending the international system of the corrupted Western motives of destruction and imposed dominance.

Through the provision and battle for an alternative to the Western imposed hegemony, Putin as well as the Zimbabwean media paint a picture of Russia as a freedom fighter within in a never-ending battle with the West that manifests in the negative tendencies that Ukraine displays. The Russian Federation, aiming at security and protection of those at stake, follows a strategy of liberation. By justifying the Russian actions through narrating them as morally correct, the narrative suggests a clear remedy for the misstate. The peaceful and defensive Kremlin counteracts the immediate threats posed by Ukraine. As a result, a successful countering of Ukraine also refers to a successful countering of the dangers posed by the Western states against the entire international system and specifically those who are victims by the Western-imposed dominance.

Summarizing, the Zimbabwean media outlets do not only mirror the narrative but enrich it. By narrating a story in which a fight for freedom means standing alongside Russia, ZBC News and The Sunday Mail, present siding with the Kremlin as the more desirable solution. This also manifests in the immediate necessity to defend the world (international system) from a break out into final stage of chaos and destruction, or in other words: WW3.

Turning back to the research question posed in the introductory chapter of this thesis, it becomes clear that there is a strategic narrative deployed within Putin's publications, which itself echoes in the analyzed Zimbabwean media outlets of ZBC News and The Sunday Mail. While the former provide a convincing base for a narrative, strategically used in foreign policy; the latter develops this base further. ZBC News and The Sunday Mail narrate an encompassing version of the Russian full-scale invasion and the following war in Ukraine, which ultimately leads to the

assumption that aligning with the Kremlin is not only the more favorable, but crucial, train of action.

The empirical analysis has thus proven that information, if strategically narrated, can have impactful implications in perceiving a conflict including roles of aggressor and defender. The thesis at hand has contributed to the state of research insofar as it provides a detailed analysis of one case in which Putin strategically deployed a narrative, which itself reflects in another state's media landscape. An adoption of the narrative through the Zimbabwean media displays the impact the Kremlin holds in nations and the information space of the global South. While the adoption of the Russian strategic narrative through the Zimbabwean media outlets might not be the only explanation of the Zimbabwean government's decision to align with the Russian Federation, it definitely sheds light on the criticalness of information for the security context of those states that might already follow a path of opposing the West.

Moreover, the enrichment of the narrative through the Zimbabwean media outlets also has shown that through the information age, a conflict that might not directly impact one's state, still holds a greater impact for the security at stake. If interpreting the findings of the thesis, the narrative mirroring through the Zimbabwean media can serve as an example of the broadening of war through the strategically deployed framed information. Through the Zimbabwean media reporting of a conflict that originally is taking place on another continent (Europe), the public becomes immediately affected by the conflict itself. Shaping an opinion about the conflict through the all-time available information, might lead to a generation of support for the Russian Federation among the broader Zimbabwean public.

By conducting this research, the thesis at hand attempts to close the massive gap in regard to sub-Saharan space within the academic debate focusing on IR / ISS. Therefore, this thesis makes up a starting point for future research. In further research, a broader focus would be beneficial to the academic field of ISS: not only an analysis of the broader public or the official governmental position within Zimbabwe, but also comparisons with other cases. By analyzing different cases, geographically spread out over the African continent, valuable insights into the support-generation of the Russian Federation could be revealed. Furthermore, the lack of research in this field regarding the African continent would benefit tremendously from a more encompassing analysis. Besides, an analysis of the Western narrative and a possible mirroring would be highly beneficial to the academic debate.

A second approach would enrich further research: the analysis of an over-time component. The analysis of a shift within Putin's narrative and hence, changes in the mirroring allow for an even deeper understanding of the Russian narrative deployed during the war in Ukraine. An over-time component would also allow insights into the constant changes of geopolitical dynamics within the international system. Moreover, it could benefit to the detection of patterns and societal trends which might fly under the radar otherwise.

A last idea for further research would be the analysis of the *opposing* side. Especially since the use of narratives is not unique to the Kremlin, but also Western states. To analyze the influence and possible mirroring of a Western strategic narrative could shed light on the continues battle in the African information arena. Further, a comparative component might provide insights into the salience of either narrative in the Zimbabwean information space.

As this thesis argues that information is always somewhat constructed and language holds a key role in this regard, the *truth* is a subject to framed information as well. As the two different sides might claim to be the medium of the one and only truth a direct stand-off between these two strategic narrations could deliver immense insights into how language is deployed to generate influence. Strategically narrated facts can polarize and the different sides of a conflict deploy strategic narratives to justify their train of action. A broader approach therefore would produce an impactful analysis of the battle for truth in the information arena.

Also, this thesis argues that communication cannot be neutral. Even if a communicator attempts to create a neutral information surrounding, language yet is strategically used to underline one's assumptions about the international system and its functionalities. The strategic use of language then can change the recipient's approach towards the specific conflict surrounding embraced through the narrative.

Putin's narration of the Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine does not only legitimize the train of action, but generates support among those not directly impacted by the conflict. Every word in Putin's addresses and article is carefully chosen and evokes a reaction in the audience. In a time where the broadening of war is so evident, social media becomes a *domain* of warfare, and polarization is increasing, an analysis of language and deployed language patterns becomes more valuable than ever.

Summary

This thesis has analyzed two Zimbabwean media outlets, ZBC News and The Sunday Mail, under the aspects of a Putin-constructed strategic narrative. To answer the research question(s), a category framework and codebook has been developed deriving from the theoretical underpinnings this thesis draws from. The findings of the thesis prove not only the existence of a strategic narrative within Putin's publications preceding the Russian war in Ukraine, but also the mirroring in and enrichment through the analyzed Zimbabwean media. The narrative as well as its mirroring are composed of a set of actors (Russia and the West) and their characteristics, the setting the conflict takes place in (a dysfunctional international system which is further endangered through the Western actions), as well as the remedy to solve the conflict (a Russian-led conflict solving). Through the strategic narrative the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine is embedded in a struggle for a change of the status quo, which is endangering Russia as a nation. The Zimbabwean media uses this narrative and then relates it to its own security experience.

Therefore, this thesis comes to the conclusion that the truth in international politics is always subject to constructed and carefully chosen communication. Considering a broadening of the concept of warfare in regard to (social) media, these findings become more important than ever.

Souhrn

Tato práce analyzovala dvě zimbabwská média, ZBC News a The Sunday Mail, z hlediska Putinem vytvořeného strategického narativu. Pro zodpovězení výzkumné otázky (otázek) byl vytvořen kategoriální rámec a kódovací kniha, které vycházejí z teoretických východisek této práce. Zjištění práce dokazují nejen existenci strategického narativu v rámci Putinových publikací předcházejících ruské válce na Ukrajině, ale také jeho zrcadlení a obohacení prostřednictvím analyzovaných zimbabwských médií. Narativ i jeho zrcadlení tvoří soubor aktérů (Rusko a Západ) a jejich charakteristiky, prostředí, v němž se konflikt odehrává (nefunkční mezinárodní systém, který je dále ohrožován akcemi Západu), a také prostředek k řešení konfliktu (řešení konfliktu pod vedením Ruska). Prostřednictvím strategického narativu je ruská agresivní válka na Ukrajině embodována do boje za změnu statu quo, který ohrožuje Rusko jako národ. Zimbabwská média tento narativ využívají a následně jej vztahují k vlastní bezpečnostní zkušenosti.

Tato práce proto dochází k závěru, že pravda v mezinárodní politice vždy podléhá konstruované a pečlivě volené komunikaci. Vzhledem k rozšíření pojmu války s ohledem na (sociální) média nabývají tato zjištění na důležitosti více než kdy jindy.

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Appendix

Appendix A: List of Used Publications in the Analysis of the Zimbabwean Media

Date	Media Outlet	Author	Title	Link
24.02.22	Sunday Mail	Online Reporter	Govt in touch with Zim citizens in Ukraine	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/new-govt-in-touch-with-zim-citizens-in-ukraine
27.02.22	Sunday Mail	Arthur G.O. Mutambara	Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/invasion-of-ukraine-was-inevitable
06.03.22	Sunday Mail	Emmanuel Kafe	Russia-Ukraine war triggers fuel price hike	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/russia-ukraine-war-triggers-fuel-price-hike
06.03.22	Sunday Mail	Leroy Dzenga	Ukraine war: Zim students relive horror	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/ukraine-war-zim-students-relive-horror
12.03.22	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	IMF to downgrade global growth forecast amid Ukraine crisis	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/new-imf-to-downgrade-global-growth-forecast-amid-ukraine-crisis
13.03.22	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	Dialogue key to ending Russia-Ukraine conflict	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/dialogue-key-to-ending-russia-ukraine-conflict
13.03.22	Sunday Mail	Tafadzaw Musara	Russia-Ukraine conflict affects Zim's daily bread	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/russia-ukraine-conflict-affects-zims-daily-bread
19.03.22	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	NEW: West's double-standard coverage of Russia-Ukraine conflict hypocritical, deplorable	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/new-wests-double-standard-coverage-of-russia-ukraine-conflict-hypocritical-deplorable
20.03.22	Sunday Mail	Senior Reporter	We are protecting our people – Russia	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/we-are-protecting-our-people-russia
20.03.22	Sunday Mail	Senior Reporter	“Local universities could admit students from Ukraine”	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/local-universities-could-admit-students-from-ukraine
22.03.22	Sunday Mail	Online Reporter	NEW: “Dialogue key to ending Ukraine tensions”	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/new-dialogue-key-to-ending-ukraine-tensions
31.03.22	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	NEW: China clarifies nature of relationship with Russia	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/new-china-clarifies-nature-

				of-relationship-with-russia
12.04.22	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	NEW: Crisis in Ukraine could slash global trade growth by half in 2022: WTO	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/new-crisis-in-ukraine-could-slash-global-trade-growth-by-half-in-2022-wto
20.04.22	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	NEW: IMF cuts 2022 global growth forecast to 3,6pc amid Russia-Ukraine conflict	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/new-imf-cuts-2022-global-growth-forecast-to-36pc-amid-russia-ukraine-conflict
05.05.22	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	NEW: Oil prices jump as EU aims for Russian oil ban	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/new-oil-prices-jump-as-eu-aims-for-russian-oil-ban
29.05.22	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	AU says Africa a “collateral victim” of Ukraine war	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/au-says-africa-a-collateral-victim-of-ukraine-war
26.06.22	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail Reporter	“Zim takes principled stand on Russia”	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/zim-takes-principled-stand-on-russia
02.10.22	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail Reporter	Implement Zim/Russia MoUs to fight sanctions	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/implement-zimrussia-mous-to-fight-sanctions
01.12.22	Sunday Mail	Victoria Ruzido	Potential impact of Russia-Ukraine conflict on Zim investments, trade	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/potential-impact-of-russia-ukraine-conflict-on-zim-investments-trade
04.12.22	Sunday Mail	Tendai Rupapa	First Lady engages senior Russian Govt officials on agric, education and technology	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/first-lady-engages-senior-russian-govt-officials-on-agric-education-and-technology
11.12.22	Sunday Mail	Tendai Rupapa	Boost for Zim-Russia medical cooperation	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/boost-for-zim-russia-medical-co-operation
18.12.22	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	No quick return for Russian athletes	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/no-quick-return-for-russian-athletes
08.01.23	Sunday Mail	Andrey Kortunov	US domestic woes could push Ukraine to sidelines	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/us-domestic-woes-could-push-ukraine-to-sidelines
08.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Kiriyenko says Russia is sure to achieve the goals of its military operation	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/politics/kiriyenko-says-russia-is-sure-to-achieve-the-goals-of-its-military-operation/

08.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Foreign aid to Ukraine a money laundering scheme, head of Chechnya says	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/politics/foreign-aid-to-ukraine-a-money-laundering-scheme-head-of-chechnya-says/
09.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Prices of top dressing and basal fertilizer drop by 16 percent	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/business/prices-of-top-dressing-and-basal-fertiliser-drop-by-16-percent/
10.01.23	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	West supplies Ukraine with expired weapons, says country's envoy to London	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/west-supplies-ukraine-with-expired-weapons-says-countrys-envoy-to-london
14.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Russian troops complete liberation of Soledar, top brass reports	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/politics/russian-troops-complete-liberation-of-soledar-top-brass-reports-2/
17.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	World Economic Forum strenghtens Zim's engagement drive	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/featured/world-economic-forum-strengthens-zims-engagement-drive/
20.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Dozens of Ukrainian soldiers switched sides in Zaporozhye over the past month – activist	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/dozens-of-ukrainian-soldiers-switched-sides-in-zaporozhye-over-the-past-month-activist/
21.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	French Politician accuses US of intent to start war in Europe	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/french-politician-accuses-us-of-intent-to-start-war-in-europe/
22.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Speaker warns of powerful retaliation for weapons supplies to Kiev for attacks on Russia	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/speaker-warns-of-powerful-retaliation-for-weapons-supplies-to-kiev-for-attacks-on-russia/
22.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Weapons supply to Kiev may spark global conflict – Bulgarian president	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/weapons-supply-to-kiev-may-spark-global-conflict-bulgarian-president/
25.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Russia will destroy Abrams tanks if Kiev gets them, ambassador	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/russia-will-destroy-abrams-tanks-ifkiev-gets-them-ambassador/
25.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Germany's Left Party believes that tank supplies to	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/politics/germanys-left-party-believes-

			Kiev bring third world war closer	that-tank-supplies-to-kiiev-bring-third-world-war-closer/
28.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	If WWII breaks out, it wont start on tanks or fighter jets, warns Medvedev	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/politics/if-wwiii-breaks-out-it-wont-start-on-tanks-or-fighter-jets-warns-medvedev/
28.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Brazil rejects sending tank shells to Germany over concern of handover to Ukraine – report	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/politics/brazil-rejects-sending-tank-shells-to-germany-over-concern-of-handover-to-ukraine-report/
28.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Russia blasts NATO over bloc's hypocrisy	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/politics/russia-blasts-nato-over-blocs-hypocrisy/
29.01.23	ZBC	ZBC News	US to pressure partners into enforcing anti-Russia sanctions – Reuters	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/politics/us-to-pressure-partners-into-enforcing-anti-russia-sanctions-reuters/
05.02.23	ZBC	ZBC News	„Western attempts are futile”, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova says	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/politics/western-attempts-are-futile-russian-foreign-ministry-spokeswoman-maria-zakharova-says/
08.02.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Top EU diplomat cant hide his racist worldview – Lavrov	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/top-eu-diplomat-cant-hide-his-racist-worldview-lavrov/
08.02.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Moscow provides update on Ukrainian losses	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/moscow-provides-update-on-ukrainian-losses/
11.02.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Return of US Special Operation Forces to Ukraine is direct involvement in conflict	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/return-of-us-special-operations-forces-to-ukraine-is-direct-involvement-in-conflict/
11.02.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Republicans push to end Ukraine aid	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/republicans-push-to-end-ukraine-aid/
14.02.23	ZBC	ZBC Reporter	NATO defence chiefs to discuss supplying fighter jets to Kiev	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/nato-defence-chiefs-to-discuss-supplying-fighter-jets-to-kiiev/
18.02.23	ZBC	ZBC News	'Polish Legion' to fight for Ukraine – media	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/polish-legion-to-fight-for-ukraine-media/

18.02.23	ZBC	ZBC News	No military winner likely in Ukraine conflict – top US general	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/no-military-winner-likely-in-ukraine-conflict-top-us-general/
19.02.23	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	China joins Russia, South Africa in naval drills	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/china-joins-russia-south-africa-in-naval-drills
20.02.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Ukrainian Soldiers cut off heads of killed mercenaries to hamper identification, says official	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/politics/ukrainian-soldiers-cut-off-heads-of-killed-mercenaries-to-hamper-identification-says-official/
22.02.23	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	Russia, Pakistan agree on major energy deal	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/russia-pakistan-agree-on-major-energy-deal
23.02.23	ZBC	ZBC Reporter	Zim, Egypt seek to consolidate ties	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/featured/zim-egypt-seek-to-consolidate-ties/
01.03.23	Sunday Mail	Online Reporter	NEW: Russian Minister jets in	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/new-russian-minister-jets-in
05.03.23	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	Russia close to encircling Ukraine's Bakhmut	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/russia-close-to-encircling-ukraines-bakhmut
05.03.23	ZBC	Owen Mando-vha	UK faces worst cost of living crisis in history	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/featured/uk-faces-worst-cost-of-living-crisis-in-history/
12.03.23	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	Will Russia sanctions dethrone "King Dollar"?	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/will-russia-sanctions-dethrone-king-dollar
13.03.23	ZBC	John Nhan-dara	PAP engages African Union on peace and security issues	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/pap-engages-african-union-on-peace-and-security-issues/
15.03.23	ZBC	Owen Mando-vha	Collapse of US banks highlights the diminishing effect of the US dollar	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/business/collapse-of-us-banks-highlights-the-diminishing-effect-of-the-us-dollar/
21.03.23	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	Xi arrives in Moscow for state visit to Russia	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/xi-arrives-in-moscow-for-state-visit-to-russia
21.03.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Survey endorses destination Victoria Falls	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/featured/survey-endorses-destination-victoria-falls/
30.03.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Keynote address to the plenary session of the Russian Federation Council of the	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/opinion/keynote-address-to-the-plenary-session-of-the

			Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation	russian-federation-council-of-the-federal-assembly-of-the-russian-federation-by-hon-m-chinomona/
02.04.23	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	Germany refuses to pledge extra tanks to Ukraine	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/germany-refuses-to-pledge-extra-tanks-to-ukraine
05.04.23	ZBC	Kevin Tutani	The rise of the Chinese Yuan, BRICS and implications for global trade	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/opinion/the-rise-of-the-chinese-yuan-brics-and-implications-for-global-trade/
26.04.23	ZBC	Owen Mando-vha	The US faces a debt default risk as its economic woes continue	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/business/the-us-faces-a-debt-default-risk-as-its-economic-woes-continue/
30.04.23	ZBC	Rutendo Matinyarare	ZEM reports ZASM to US Secretary of State	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/opinion/zem-reports-zasm-to-us-secretary-of-state/
09.05.23	ZBC	ZBC Reporter	Russia Celebrates Nazi victory anniversary	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/featured/russia-celebrates-nazi-victory-anniversary/
14.06.23	ZBC	Kevin Tutani	Whats happening to the price of coal?	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/opinion/whats-happening-to-the-price-of-coal/
16.06.23	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	NEW: Chinese yuan leads Russian foreign trade currency settlements	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/new-chinese-yuan-leads-russian-foreign-trade-currency-settlements
27.06.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Black Sea Grain Deal. Terms, Successes and Risks Ahead	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/opinion/black-sea-grain-deal-terms-successes-and-risks-ahead/
30.06.23	Sunday Mail	Innocent Madonko	Russia-Africa Summit ends on high note	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/russia-africa-summit-ends-on-high-note
24.07.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Russia and Africa: Joining Efforts for peace, Progress and a successful future – President Putin	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/politics/russia-and-africa-joining-efforts-for-peace-progress-and-a-successful-future-president-putin/
27.07.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Roscongress Foundation's Innovation Space to Present Advanced Solutions for Africa	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/africa/roscongress-foundations-innovation-space-to-present-advanced-solutions-for-africa/
27.07.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Russia, Africa together – President Putin	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/featured/russia-

				africa-together-president-putin/
28.07.23	ZBC	Kevin Tutani	Russia-Africa Summit: Leveraging on mutual trust and historical connections for a vigorous future	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/opinion/russia-africa-summit-leveraging-on-mutual-trust-and-historical-connections-for-a-vigorous-future/
28.07.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Zimbabwe stands with Russia – President Mnangagwa	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/featured/zimbabwe-stands-with-russia-president-mnangagwa/
29.07.23	ZBC	Abigirl Tembo	President Mnangagwa challenges politicians to acquaint themselves with the law	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/uncategorized/president-mnangagwa-challenges-politicians-to-acquaint-themselves-with-the-law/
29.07.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Pledges for more partnerships as Second Russia-Africa Summit ends	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/uncategorized/pledges-for-more-partnerships-as-second-russia-africa-summit-ends/
06.08.23	Sunday Mail	Tanyradzwa Rusike	Zim, Russia enhance co-operation	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/zim-russia-enhance-co-operation
06.08.23	Sunday Mail	Sunday Mail	Russia will return to grain deal after resolution of hitch	https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/russia-will-return-to-grain-deal-after-resolution-of-hitch
16.08.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Leading director of TV BRICS special projects talks about working with international team of filmmakers	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/leading-director-of-tv-brics-special-projects-talks-about-working-with-international-team-of-filmmakers/
19.08.23	ZBC	ZBC News	Developing countries media urged to challenge stereotypes	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/international/developing-countries-media-urged-to-challenge-stereotypes/
21.08.23	ZBC	Kevin Tutani	The case for nuclear energy, part II	https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/featured/the-case-for-nuclear-energy-part-ii/

Appendix B: Codebook (Narrative Analysis of Putin's Publications)

Code	Coding rule	Anchor example - self	Anchor example - other
Character_1			
1_Interests	The interest of the self or the other must be articulated.	our interests and absolutely legitimate demands	/
1_Behavior	Behavioral traits are pointed out.	bold and immediate action	attempts at pressure and blackmail
1_Characteristics	Description of specific features or qualities of the self or the other.	justice and truth on our side is what makes us truly strong	contemptuous and disdainful attitude
Actors_2			
2_States	A state is presented as a specific actor.	openness of the new, modern Russia	Incidentally, US politicians, political scientists and journalists write and say that a veritable "empire of lies" has been created inside the United States in recent years. It is hard to disagree with this – it is really so
2_Non-state actors	A non-state entity is presented as a specific actor.	/	/
2_Great powers	Great powers are presented as a specific actor.	Russia as their enemy.	the question is not about NATO itself. It merely serves as a tool of US foreign policy
2_Normal Powers	Normal Powers are presented as a specific actor.	/	/
2_Rogue states	A rogue state is presented as a specific actor.	/	/
2_Terrorists	Terrorists are presented as a specific actor.	/	/
2_NGOs	NGOs are presented as a specific actor.	/	/
2_MNCs	MNCs are presented as a specific actor.	/	/
Decisions_3			
3_Decision-making processes (underlying)	Processes are presented as an influence on the decision-making while remaining underlying.	and what trials we had to go through	/
Setting_4			
4_Functionalities of the international system	A clear description of the way processes take place in the international system.	This has to do with the entire system of international relations, and sometimes even US allies	/

4_Principles and rationales of the international system	Description of a fundamental proposition about the international system.	politics is a dirty business	/
4_Decision-making processes	Definition of how decision-making processes in the international system take place.	For our country, it is a matter of life and death,	/
4_Involved Stakes	Involved issues that might be influenced by a change of the setting.	key aspects of ensuring the security of Russia	/
4_Appropriate behavior	Description of which behavioral traits and trains of action are appropriate.	professionally, smoothly, patiently, and with due regard and respect for the interests of all states and one's own responsibility	/
4_Inappropriate behavior	Description of which behavioral traits and trains of action are inappropriate.	Make no mistake, they [the West] had no reason to act this way.	/
4_Background	Circumstances that formed the setting in a way that is relevant for the current setting.	tragic events in Donbass	/
4_Temporality	Reference to the existence of the setting over a time frame.	past 30 years	/
4_Historical analogies	Embedding of the current setting in a broader history.	If history is any guide, we know that in 1940 and early 1941 the Soviet Union went to great lengths to prevent war or at least delay its outbreak.	
Emplotment_5			
5_Conflict	Description of a sort of disagreement between the self and the other.	Those who aspire to global dominance have publicly designated Russia as their enemy	/
5_Dangers	Description of processes, actions, etc. that might endanger the self.	Its military machine is moving and, as I said, is approaching our very border	/
5_Action (danger confrontation)	Description of how the perceived danger should be addressed.	They did not leave us any other option for defending Russia and our people, other than the one we are forced to use today. In these circumstances, we have to take bold and immediate action	/
5_Means for action	Definition of which means are available to "tackle" the dangers and conflict.	devoted soldiers and officers of Russia's Armed Forces will perform their duty with professionalism and courage	/

Emplotment_6			
6_Road to resolution	A description of how the defined issue can be resolved.	In this context, in accordance with Article 51 (Chapter VII) of the UN Charter, with permission of Russia's Federation Council, and in execution of the treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic, ratified by the Federal Assembly on February 22, I made a decision to carry out a special military operation.	/
6_Objectives	Preferred outcomes of the conflictual situation.	protect, demilitarize, denazify	finish us off
6_Success	Defines the preferred outcome of the situation that most likely will be reached upon the completion of the objectives.	I believe in this, in our common future.	destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature
6_Failure	Defines the un-preferred outcome of the situation that most likely will be reached upon the failure of completing the objectives.	/	/
6_Credit	Defines who is "thank" for once the situation is resolved.	In 2014, Russia was obliged to protect the people of Crimea and Sevastopol from those who you yourself call "nats." The people of Crimea and Sevastopol made their choice in favour of being with their historical homeland, Russia, and we supported their choice. As I said, we could not act otherwise.	/
6_Blame	Defines who is to declare responsible for the conflict situation.	Focused on their own goals, the leading NATO countries are supporting the far-right	/

		nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine, those who will never forgive the people of Crimea and Sevastopol for freely making a choice to reunite with Russia.	
Narrator_0	Clear indication of who is narrating.	President of Russia Vladimir Putin	/

The anchor examples all stem from Putin's *Address by the President of the Russian Federation* (February 24th 2022).

Appendix C: Codebook (Qualitative Content Analysis of Zimbabwean Media Outlets)

Codes	Sub-Codes	Coding-Rule and Anchor Example	Frequency
			498
3_Emplotment: blame to NATO as the embodiment of the West		The coding unit presents NATO as those responsible for the conflict. NATO functions as the prolonged arm of the US and Western foreign policy. Anchor example: The stance of NATO and Western leaders has been that (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, A.; The Sunday Mail)	9
3_Emplotment: Credit to Russia for protection		Positive credit in resolving the conflict goes to the Russian Federation within the coding unit as Russia ensures security. Anchor example: Putin stopped that adventure by annexing Crimea (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, A.; The Sunday Mail)	6
	Possible vulnerability in the future	The coding unit sees a change in the security landscape as endangering the Russian security and hence, calls for protection. Anchor example: Russia will be totally encircled and thus vulnerable. (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, A.; The Sunday Mail)	1
	Invasion of Ukraine as a cautionary measure.	The coding unit characterizes Putin's invasion of Ukraine as taking cautionary extra-measures to ensure security in the future. Anchor example: by invading Ukraine now, Putin is being preemptive (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, A.; The Sunday Mail)	3
3_Emplotment: Western objectives: reaching destruction		The coding unit focuses on the Western objectives. The Western objectives are presented as a guideline for destruction and contain negative connotations. Often these objectives are brought into connection with the global US-hegemony. Anchor example: It does not make geo-political-strategic and military sense, nor foster global peace and security to have Ukraine as a member of	28

		NATO (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, A.; The Sunday Mail)	
	Failure to reach aims	In the coding unit the aims of the conflict are presented as unreachable, e.g. through non-existent support, lack of superiority or just failures. Anchor examples: The West's unprecedented military aid to Ukraine has failed to prevent significant losses among Kiev's forces (08.02.2023 - Moscow provides update on Ukrainian losses, ZBC News)	8
	Threat of WW3	The coding unit presents the dangers of the conflict escalation: an approach of a World War 3. Anchor example: German government's decision to supply Leopard 2 tanks to the Kiev government, saying that it potentially brings humanity closer to the third world war, ZBC News)	8
	Ukraine is aligning with the deceiving methods of the West	In the coding unit Ukrainian behavior is described as unlawfully advancing the own position in a mischievous way. Anchor example: Zelensky is not to convince the US political establishment about the need to continue supporting Kiev, but rather to preserve the Ukrainian narrative in the focus of the US public (08.01.2023 – US domestic woes could push Ukraine to sidelines, Kortunov, A.; The Sunday Mail) Foreign aid to Ukraine a money laundering scheme (08.01-2023- Foreign aid to Ukraine a money laundering scheme, head of Chechnya says, ZBC News)	12

	<p>Ukraine is militarily backed by Western military systems</p>	<p>In the coding unit the military backing of Ukraine is presented as a negative impact. Anchor example: The most intriguing outcome of the negotiations in Washington was the decision by the White House to provide Ukraine with the Patriot Air Defence System, capable of bringing down cruise missiles, short-range ballistic missiles and aircraft at a significantly higher ceiling than previously delivered US air defence systems (08.01.2023 – US domestic woes could push Ukraine to sidelines, Kortunov, A.; The Sunday Mail)</p>	<p>23</p>
	<p>Russian war is taking attention from conflicts that matter</p>	<p>The coding unit depicts the Russian war in Ukraine as taking away the attention from other conflicts in which the West is endangering global peace structures. Anchor example: while the Russia-Ukraine conflict is under the spotlight, the sufferings of people in such countries as Iraq and Afghanistan, both invaded by the United States, are receiving less coverage by Western media. (19.03.2022 – NEW: West’s double-standard coverage of Russia-Ukraine conflict hypocritical, deplorable, The Sunday Mail)</p>	<p>3</p>
	<p>Western double standards</p>	<p>Western double standards lead to a situation that is of security concern and are impacting the conflict negatively. Anchor example: West’s double-standard coverage of Russia-Ukraine conflict hypocritical, deplorable (19.03.2022 – NEW: West’s double-standard coverage of Russia-Ukraine conflict hypocritical, deplorable, The Sunday Mail)</p>	<p>7</p>
	<p>Western illegal and "over the top" behavior</p>	<p>The West acts without a legal basis and in an overexaggerated way in the coding unit. Anchor example: Meanwhile, so called Russian oligarchs (wealthy businessman of Russian origin) all over the world are under siege with sanctions slapped on them while their assets are being illegally seized. (13.03.2023 – Dialogue key to ending Russia-Ukraine conflict, The Sunday Mail)</p>	<p>14</p>

3_Emploiment: Conflict Substance: A clash of powers		The coding unit must clearly indicate the substance of the conflict as a clash between the wrong (the West) and the right (Russia). Anchor example: from the tension in Europe (06.03.2022 – Russia-Ukraine war triggers fuel price hike, Kafe, E.; The Sunday Mail)	2
	Ukraine as the prolonged arm of Western powers	In the coding unit the Ukrainian government, state structures or armed forces are presented as as proxy, puppets / prolonged arm of Western powers. Anchor example: Washington's actions shows that the Americans are constantly raising the 'bar' of military assistance to their puppet government (25.01.2023 - Russia will destroy Abrams tanks if Kiev gets them, ambassador, ZBC News)	15
	Ukraine: a staged, performance-like conflict	The coding unit deploys a characterization of Ukraine that leads to the image of the war being staged, performed or not having a real impact. Anchor example: Zelensky and his team did everything they could to turn his trip into a dramatic performance. (08.01.2023 – US domestic woes could push Ukraine to sidelines, Kortunov, A.; The Sunday Mail)	5
	Ukraine as an example of Western, morally incorrect behavior	Behavior, such as racism, superficiality etc. is pointed out through either Ukrainian or Western authorities. Anchor example: On average it was taking black people 24 hours to cross, yet for white people it was taking significantly less time. (06.03.2022 – Ukraine war: Zim students relive horror, Dzenga, L.; The Sunday Mail)	20
	The war impacts the Zimbabwean security landscape	In the coding unit the war in Ukraine is characterized as impacting the Zimbabwean security situation as well. Anchor example: The Russian-Ukraine conflict simply reminds all of us that we need to till the land and provide for our food. Geopolitics is unpredictable and mutates very fast. To date, all countries in Africa remain net importers of wheat and that situation is untenable. (13.03.2022 – Russia-Ukraine conflict affects Zim's daily bread, Musara, T.; The Sunday Mail)	5

	Russia and Ukraine as equal parties in the war	The coding unit presents Russia and Ukraine as both equal war parties, rather than a Russian invasion. Anchor example: the war pitting Russia and Ukraine (06.03.2022 – Russia-Ukraine war triggers fuel price hike, Kafe, E.; The Sunday Mail)	13
	Western actions are responsible for Russian defensive actions (invasion)	In the coding unit the invasion of Ukraine is presented as the (logical) outcome of the Western entanglement in foreign relations. Anchor example: Yes, the crisis in Ukraine could have been avoided if a different understanding of global affairs was at play and world leaders had a better understanding of history and geo-strategic considerations, 27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, A.; The Sunday Mail)	4
	A solution to the conflict is based on Russia's conflict approach.	The conflict solution is presented as being the one the Russian Federation follows. Anchor example: While asserting their sovereignty and remaining an independent nation, the people of Ukraine and their leaders must commit to NOT joining NATO. Realpolitik demands this. They will not be the first to follow this pragmatic posture. (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, A.; The Sunday Mail)	3
	Russian diplomatic efforts	The coded unit needs to clearly indicate that Russian officials are undertaking diplomatic efforts to solve the situation in the international system. Anchor example: The future of diplomacy must be reimagined and reinvented (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, A.; The Sunday Mail)	18
	Crisis in Ukraine	The coded unit is presenting the clash of powers rather as a crisis or heightened tensions than an actual war. Anchor example: Ukraine Crisis (12. 04. 2022 – NEW: Crisis in Ukraine could slash global trade growth by half in 2022: WTO, The Sunday Mail)	15

3_Emplotment: reasonable objectives: reaching security and multipolarity		The coding unit presents the objectives as reasonable. The objectives entail the reaching of security for the Russian Federation. Anchor example: We are sure that a new multipolar world order, the contours of which are already seen, will be more just and democratic (24.07.2023 - Russia and Africa: Joining Efforts for peace, Progress and a successful future – President Putin, ZBC News)	8
	Defensive use of force	In the coding unit the use of force is described in relation to it being a defensive measure. Anchor example: this would provoke retaliatory measures with the use of more powerful weapons (22.01.2023 - Speaker warns of powerful retaliation for weapons supplies to Kiev for attacks on Russia, ZBC News)	2
	Security and freedom	In the coding unit the Russian aims are brought into connection with guaranteeing security and / or freedom. Anchor example: Russian troops complete liberation (14.01.2023 - Russian troops complete liberation of Soledar, top brass reports, ZBC News)	4
3_Emplotment: Russian lawful actions countering injustice		Within the coding unit the Russian actions are presented as acts of accordance with the international law to counter a general injustice. Anchor example: President Vladimir Putin and the people of Russia are therefore within their rights to demand the demilitarisation of Ukraine which at present poses a clear and present danger to their country's sovereignty and territorial integrity (13.03.2023 – Dialogue key to ending Russia-Ukraine conflict, The Sunday Mail)	7
	Ukraine is not seeking peace	Russian actions, objectives etc. are presented as peaceful in direct connection to Ukraine seeking otherwise. Anchor example: Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu issued the relative directions. The Ukrainian government has reacted negatively to the idea of a ceasefire (08.01.2023 - Kiri-yenko says Russia is sure to achieve the goals of its military operation, ZBC News)	6

	Countering (neo-) colonialism	In the coding unit the Russian Federation is presented as an actor in the struggle against global injustice and / or (neo-) colonialism. Anchor example: Russia President Vladimir Putin said the parties resolved to counter neo-colonialism, the use of coercive measures and illegitimate sanctions by the West to cow other nations, as well as attempts to undermine traditional moral values. (30.06.2023 – Russia-Africa Summit ends on high note, Madonko, I.; The Sunday Mail)	14
	Russia as a proactive peacemaker	A coded unit needs to display an indication that Russia take proactive steps to solve the conflictual situation. Anchor example: President Putin has shown us that he is ready to engage in dialogue and search for solutions and we need to convince the other party right now and I hope that we will be able to do that (30.06.2023 – Russia-Africa Summit ends on high note, Madonko, I.; The Sunday Mail)	5
2_Setting: Western actions as an affront against Russia		The coding unit depicts Western behavior and actions as an irrational attack / affront against Russia. Anchor example: completely undermining Russia (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable (Mutambara, A.; The Sunday Mail)	4
	NATO expansion to trigger Russia	The expansion of NATO is characterized as triggering Russia in the coding unit. Anchor example: Russia, a global superpower, felt encircled by its former NATO adversaries (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, A.; The Sunday Mail)	3
	Ukraine as the pinnacle of expansive NATO behavior	In the coding unit the possible accession of Ukraine into NATO is presented as a peak of unlawful NATO // Western behavior. Anchor example: Russian demands that Ukraine must remain independent, but should not join NATO are not entirely unreasonable. Ukraine has a nearly 2000km border with Russia, and its joining of NATO leads to the total encirclement of Russia by its current and historical opponents. (27.02.2022 – Invasion in	1

		Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, A.; The Sunday Mail)	
2_Setting: Russian Security is at Stake		Within the coding unit the ensurance of Russian security is presented as the main stake of the conflict. Anchor example: Russia's security concerns (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	6
2_Setting: Crucial Russian Decision-making		Russian decision-making processes are presented as crucial to ensure their role within the international system within the coded unit. Anchor example: When Ukraine becomes a member of NATO, Russia will be totally encircled and thus vulnerable. More importantly, any attack on Ukraine then will invoke a swift NATO military response by operation of the NATO agreement. Hence Putin's demand that Ukraine must never be a member of NATO is reasonable. Both NATO and the people of Ukraine must have accepted this position (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	3
2_Setting: Russian, rational behavior		The coding unit depicts Russian behavior as entailing much ratiom thought, rather than rapid irrational movements. Anchor example: This is common sense. (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	1

	Transparency in warfare	The Russian actions are described detailed, creating the image of transparency in their conduct of warfare. Anchor example: Full control of Soledar makes it possible to cut off the supply routes of Ukrainian troops in Artyomovsk located southwest and subsequently block the city and entrap the Ukrainian military there, the general explained. The seizure of Soledar by Russian troops was facilitated by continuous air, missile, and artillery strikes on Ukrainian army positions, Konashenkov reported. (14.01.2023 - Russian troops complete liberation of Soledar, top brass reports, ZBC News)	8
	Comprehensible behavior.	Russian actions are presented as comprehensible and transparent. Anchor example: Clearly, given the history of the Cold War, Russia's security concerns are understandable. (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	2
2_Setting: Historical Analogies - Soviet Determinants		Within the coding unit the Soviet Union and its downfall plays a role for modern politics in the international system. Anchor example: current and historical opponents. (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	17
	Russia and Ukraine are intertwined	In the coding unit the historicity leads to Ukraine and Russia being deeply intertwined until today. Anchor example: Russian speaking folks in Ukraine in the year 2022. (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	2
	USSR influences until today.	In the coding unit the USSR's influence is presented as influencing the international system until today. Anchor example: Between 1989 and 1992, the Warsaw Pact collapsed, and the USSR disintegrated with the Soviet republics becoming independent nations such as Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Estonia and Belarus. Russia remained a superpower, having inherited the bulk of the Soviet military and	4

		industrial strength, particularly a potent nuclear arsenal. (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	
	West is twisting history	In the coding unit the West is characterized as bending the truth to justify actions. Anchor example: the whole mainstream discourse on Ukraine is ahistorical (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	2
	NATO vs Warsaw Pact	The historical alliances are influencing the security landscape of today. Anchor example: Warsaw Pact — an eastern military alliance established in opposition to NATO, a Western military alliance (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	2
2_Setting: Western Destructivism		The coding unit indicates that the current international system is dysfunctional and does not reflect reality. Anchor example: The posturing by NATO members that Ukraine is free to join since it is a sovereign nation is at best naïve if not an outright manifestation of primitive ignorance. (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	1
	The West is self-absorbed	In the coding unit the West is presented as being self-absorbed and only focusing on its own aims. Anchor example: self-serving intellectual ineptitude (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	3
	Western actions fuel conflict	Western actions are presented as conflict-inducing in the coded unit. Anchor example: inflames conflicts (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	5

	Imposed Western hegemony	The coded unit presents Western actions as unreflected and imposed on the rest of the system. Anchor example: The single, unsophisticated and wholly unbalanced narrative we have been receiving from Western leaders and the leading global news outlets such CNN, BBC and Sky News is not conducive to resolving global challenges. To the contrary, such brazen and self-serving intellectual ineptitude inflames conflicts. (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	24
2_Setting: Peaceful Russia, peaceful USSR		The current Russian activities are presented as peaceful due to the peaceful nature of the USSR within a coding unit.	0
1_Actor_ The West: incoherent and unethical		The coding unit presents the Western actions as difficult or impossible to comprehend and morally incorrect. Anchor example: particularly mischievous ambition of the Western alliance was to control the Black Sea fleet (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	15
	Irrational behavior	The Western behavior is completely over the top and inadequate for the conflict situation. Anchor example: total irrational jingoism (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	17
	The mainstream media as an echo chamber of Western thought.	The media is characterized as just unthoughtfully reproducing the Western thought. Anchor example: global media outlets which do not question these foolish foreign policy pronouncements but act as echo chambers of the unintelligent posturing by Western leaders. (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	12
	The West lacks a sophisticated understanding of international affairs.	In the coded unit Western behavior is presented as being not multi-layered and lump all situations together. Anchor example: does not augur well for creating intelligent and nuanced understanding of global affairs (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine	4

		was inevitable, Mutambara, I.; The Sunday Mail)	
1_ Actors_Russia a lawful, coherent morally right actor		The coding unit presents the Russian actions as easily to comprehend and morally right. Anchor example: Without support from Russia, our independence would not have been achieved. Today, as we face illegal sanctions imposed on the people of Zimbabwe by the West, the Russian Federation continues to stand with us, with the same resolve, comradeship, and determination for justice (30.03.2023 - Keynote address to the plenary session of the Russian Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, ZBC News)	11
	A desirable actor	In the coding unit the Russian Federation is presented as an actor with whom it is desirable to associate oneself with. Anchor example: I mean at least a few dozen of servicemen switching to the Russian side in the Zaporozhye Region (20.01.2023 - Dozens of Ukrainian soldiers switched sides in Zaporozhye over the past month – activist, ZBC News)	4
	A leading nation	The coded unit depicts Russia as a leading nation in highlighted sectors. Anchor example: We know that the Russian Federation is now the most advanced country in the world when it comes to research and development. (11.12.2023 – Boost for Zim-Russia medical cooperation, Rupapa, T.; The Sunday Mail)	7
	Promoting peace	In the coding unit the Russian Federation is presented as an actor who promotes peace and stability. Anchor example: safeguard peace and stability in the region and protect sea lanes (19.02.2023 – China joins Russia, South Africa in naval drills, The Sunday Mail)	8

	A reliable partner with serious intentions	In this coding unit Russia is presented as a reliable partner. Anchor example: Russia has boosted its investment in Zimbabwe, (01.12.2022 – Potential impact of Russia-Ukraine conflict on Zim investments, trade, Rudzido, V.; The Sunday Mail)	54
	Russia as a great power	In the coding unit the Russian Federation is characterized as nation with great power status. Anchor example: Russia remained a superpower (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, A.; The Sunday Mail)	6
1_Actors_Individual vs Collective: Russia against the West		The coding unit must clearly indicate a distinction between Russia and the West. Anchor example: The Russian economy is relatively robust and largely independent of the West (27.02.2022 – Invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, Mutambara, A.; The Sunday Mail)	4